

# Selected Transcription from Talk at UN Plaza, Berlin, 2006

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I have to admit that I might have a problem when looking at this question of failure. With this first manifestation of unitednationsplaza, I am a little nervous about the idea of a group of middle-aged men talking to you in a room as a model of how to proceed. My nightmare is sitting in a room with people, self-consciously criticising the idea of a middle-aged man sitting with people in a room, talking about the idea of sitting in a room self-consciously critiquing the idea of a middle-aged man sitting in a room. This is a dangerous cycle, but this is the way we're doing it this weekend. Men talking. This is what we've got for now, and what you have to understand, within this notion of failure, or pretentious non-success, is that what we're talking about for these two days is based on a lot of background discussion and arguments about the possibilities of this project. Originally I think that a lot of people felt that this project, right from the outset, might have to be connected to the idea that there is a problem, or a crisis, which is a classical formulation of how to approach any question within cultural production, and is maybe a perfectly reasonable way to do it.

But the nature of the crisis is not discussed so much beyond the idea of the idea of crisis per se. Beyond looking at the existing school structure, for example, and having one or two thoughts about the apparent failure of Cyprus to get moving. But it was actually in London last week that I realised what the nature of a concrete crisis might be. There were a series of talks in the bubble, the Rem Koolhaas structure, and they did a day about money, but they didn't call it that, they called it something else, like production and consumption. During the day Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rem interviewed the founders and publishers of Frieze magazine, and when they asked the standard question, which they ask everyone; "Do you have any unrealised projects?", they said they're thinking about opening a school. This, to me, might be the key, in a way, to this idea of crisis in relation to Unitednationsplaza. Frieze were looking at the question of a school from a business perspective, a bit like people who buy shares and stocks in companies that are undervalued. They thought it might be a good moment to start a school. It could be easy. They joked that they are looking for things within cultural production that are either badly done or undervalued. When you find a situation like this you can just step in and anything you do will probably be ok. You don't have to achieve much. Take an art fair, for example, you do not have to do much more than everybody else does as the expectations are so low that you'll probably be ok if you just match the existing model.

So this is one of the issues regarding the structures that we are dealing with: we're on the verge of something, it's occurring to people that there's a kind of potential here, so we have to look to the near future as much as the activated present, we have to think about who wants to possess the discourse of collective educational processes. This could be a moment of concrete crisis. I was very determined that this school should be an open space, a free school, and you know, to some extent, this is what's happening, but on the other hand, it's not quite. It's still in a stage of just before, like the day before the first underground train. And I am a little bit nervous about the idea of maintaining things in constant suspension.

One of the things I want to do today is talk about my work and research into developments in social democracies, around the point where everyone thinks that everything was OK. I have been looking at Scandinavia and the Netherlands, primarily. And I want to relate this to the idea or moment of hope. Think of a notional date such as June 22, 1974, when everything was kind of working in the Northern European car factory. I want to talk about the potential of the idea of holding something in a moment; you'll see later on what I mean by that. For example, going back to art schools for a second, in the British context, there's this inability to escape from the 1968 environment, an important moment for education, and there hasn't been a paradigm shift since within any art school structure because the changes then were so fundamental. It is very difficult for me to know whether a true new shift can be brought about because people have been doing a lot of work to try and save something that was important and we might make the situation worse. They are trying to hold the June 22, 1974 moment, as it were, in a constant state of tension, but if you do so, you run the risk of becoming the architect of your own collapse, because you end up becoming incredibly vulnerable, you become defensive, and this is something very hard because you are defending a phantom, or an echo of potential, with no concrete relationship to that '68 moment.

Today I'll have a look at some things I've been involved in, not in order to do a show and tell, but to talk about some models, because I obviously know about them quite well, and I've generated all this material that I've never shared beyond the institutional framework. It's the stuff institutions tend to suppress; the textual material, the dialogues that are generated, the stuff in the archive, the things that don't get exposed normally. I want to map out models of collective behaviour that could be useful in this structure. Five models.

The first model is the idea of not bothering to work together at all – to actually go off individually and fuck up everyone else's system. It's the 'Scooby Doo' concept. You split up and then meet back by the Mystery Machine. In 1997 I was invited to take part in Documenta, and one of the things I was very concerned about was the archival quality of something documentary, the sense that there is a library or archive of ideas, and one work I did there never got officially acknowledged, because it didn't have any physical presence that could be viewed by the public. I wrote a text based on the idea that, in 1971, there had been a meeting in Kassel to decide basically to stop Documenta, to get rid of it as a regular event. The notion was to change the city into a constant machine, a culture machine that would be a new way of thinking about how to function. A continual ongoing revolutionary state. I wrote this text and put it in the Documenta archive for November 1971. Since then it's been waiting to be found. So you fuck with time a little bit, alone, that's one model. The rogue individual who fucks with the archive. If you can fix the past, then, a bit like 'Back to the Future', the present changes too.

The other model I wanted to talk about is the trial model. Of course, you do get echoes of that within academic structures. Yale University Graduate School runs a kind of a trial model – one person with work and a group of people interrogating them. But I don't only mean trial in a judicial art school sense, but the ongoing testing of something institutionally. You question, you investigate, and you reach out to people who do not necessarily have vested interests in art but specialise in certain areas. You would interrogate these people as advisors. So one of the projects I wanted to talk about is *The Trial of Pol Pot*, that I presented with Philippe Parreno in 1998 in Grenoble, France. With this project we decided to address the fact that, in the late

nineties in the US for example, everything was fine, I mean obviously it was not fine, there were grand over-reaching imperialist politics, but in industrial military terms, it was a relatively friendly and stable moment, so people were looking around for something that hadn't been dealt with, and Clinton, who is a kind of soft democratic yet compromised potential liberal, along with me, had noticed that Pol Pot was still alive, living in the jungles of Cambodia, which is a very interesting idea. The idea that this architect of genocide was living in jungle was so strange that Philippe and I said we were going to do the *Trial of Pol Pot* in Grenoble, to try to find a way to imagine and image this peculiarity. Of course the Khmer Rouge exists as a classic conservative accusation to anyone who wants to be a Marxist. The question is always: "And what about Pol Pot?" In order to make the project function, therefore, we decided to work with advisors, which is an interesting thing for an artist. But as we began the research the Khmer Rouge suddenly decided that they actually wanted to put Pol Pot on trial themselves. This was irritating. And then, all of a sudden Pol Pot conveniently died of a 'heart attack'. All this was happening while we were working on the exhibition.

At the same time, I had a tense stand-off with the director of the space about his determination to have an information room about Cambodia in the museum to head-off any misunderstandings. My rejection of the idea had something to do with my family affiliation with Nationalist Irish politics. A suspicion of transparency comes when you grow up sympathetic to a nationalist, formerly quasi-Marxist republican organisation. You tend to be suspicious of the idea of telling everyone what you're doing when the stakes are high. The dynamic of *The Trial of Pol Pot* had to do with an argument about the extent to which we should be transparent in terms of our relationship to Cambodia, a relationship which didn't exist, of course. So that's the trial model. Conceit, advisors, institutional analysis and the questioning of structures outside of the immediate art context.

The third model might be the rewriting history in a more concrete way. Education definitely needs addressing, and in the *Trial of Pol Pot*, we decided to include a specific educational component. I contacted Robert De Niro, because I thought this would be an interesting way around the problem of standard education systems and asked if he wanted to come to Grenoble and picture this thing. Try to create an image of the idea of a man in a Cambodian jungle with the rump of his organization, waiting, in a moment of suspended resolution. The BBC talked about this situation as something impossible to describe. De Niro apparently agreed in principle, although whether he actually discussed it with anyone remains unclear. But circumstances conspired against us and he didn't make it in the end. So what we organised instead was a puppet show for children. A hand puppet playing the role of the Russian mediator – the person who can communicate who is not French or British or American – the Russian bear, who can explain to children why Robert De Niro won't come and explain the exhibition.

You should also consider a model that involves the suspension of decision-making – or is based on the idea of taking action first and deciding how to define it later. I am interested in the history of car factories as locations of direct action and struggle. They are generally and historically macho environments, but they are also places that directly expose the machinations and struggles of the workers against corporate interests while at the same time producing an object, the car, that is an ideologically and ecologically loaded object.

Throughout the post war history of car production, companies like Volvo, for example, were viewed as the paradigm of how to alleviate the worst aspects of industrialised production until, of course, they were bought by Ford, along with Aston-Martin and Jaguar to form the Prestige Car Group in the 1980s. I am interested in the period just before that, going back to the 1970's when Volvo really wanted to come up with a way to change the way you produce things in a factory. They built a series of experimental factories with windows looking out to the countryside where you could work fast or slow. Or you could decide, with your team, that you would work all night and day without a break, and then take the rest of the week off. Teamwork meant exchange of skills and flexibility and, as long as the car got built, the system of team working was surprisingly efficient. The workers created a new space-time towards the ends of their shifts. And often spent this new free time talking about how to work, which is a very interesting thing to do in a factory environment. These moments of discussion made them even more productive. Working this way, they actually produced cars that lasted longer and were quicker to produce, because they were more efficiently and enthusiastically built. People did not feel as bored and alienated anymore. Suddenly it might be, "OK, I'll do the seats today, let's all paint together tomorrow and you can do a bit of everything while reading us a book". People started to have an engaged relationship to the industrial environment, in a way. And this meant they could also create new forms of time for themselves, often spent sitting around talking about how to work faster. After a few months they might be building a car in thirty-five hours rather than forty. The more time they had to create discourse, the better they were at building cars. So you had the development of a cycle of discourse and production that is very interesting in relation to the possibilities of what we're doing at Unitednationsplaza – acceleration and reflection in relation to production.

I have an unwritten text where I describe how the people who were working in the experimental Volvo factory – which closed down some years after the sale to Ford – go back to the now empty factory to hang around. Initially they continue the experimental processes that had been suspended without actually building cars anymore. They cut more holes in the walls, to get more of a view, a world-view, and they play some games with the signage. They turn everything around, they make word-games in Swedish about different aspects of work and life. And they just sit around and pass the time waiting to decide what to do next. As time passes they start to talk about how they may have become the architects of their own destruction through their embrace of flexibility. This is something we have to think about too, they embraced flexibility and discourse as a way to alleviate the usual modes of production, yet by becoming flexible, there was nothing to stop them becoming infinitely flexible. As we know, they may well have flexibilised themselves out of a job. It's very interesting in India right now, there's a clerical workers' strike against the outsourcing of jobs to developing countries which have even lower costs than India. Of course, this is causing much amusement among sacked American office workers because they think – "ah, told you so, you don't like it now, do you?" They don't have jobs any longer as they have been outsourced to India and now India is now facing the problem of outsourcing to poorer countries.

Now there's also a fifth model to talk about in relation to Unitednationsplaza. It is maybe the most difficult thing to talk about and you can call it the 'transfer of responsibility' model. It describes a situation where certain people are working in parallel towards a genuine shift of power. I have some research findings that I came up with following a process of investigating

the non-specific qualities that affect the meaning and relative status of the art object in the developed self-conscious productive context. I developed this research with 15 graduate students at Columbia University. And we came up with 424 points that must be considered in order to understand art now. In order to understand certain political, psychological and ethical factors in contemporary art, you might have to approach people who are not so visible in the cultural context. And I think it could be very interesting to view Unitednationsplaza as creating a similar foundation for reassessing ideas. A place that might offer strategic support to other groups of people, who are not us. A place for strategic, constructive, conspiratorial activity that will enable people who are theoretically not prepared for, or politically excluded from, the terminology of sophisticated critique in relation to contemporary culture. Our role will be to just defend them or guide them, the participant becomes the centre, but not in the "you choose who you want to come and talk to" sort of way, but in terms of actually running Unitednationsplaza and setting the agenda. So that's the fifth idea. A total transfer of responsibility, built into a system that forces it to happen, an ongoing and continual enforced transference of responsibility, on a regular basis. You will have a constant upheaval. You will not start from any basic assumptions but instead we would actually start again, every year, and redefine the 'school' from scratch. We would also severely challenge the notion that teachers or artists are the best people to teach. I actually do a simple poll every year at Columbia, asking – "do you think it's an automatic assumption that artists are the best to people to teach artists?" and surprisingly the answers are not straightforward. Quite a lot of the graduate students don't automatically assume that artists are the best people to teach artists.

To recap, we could call the first idea the rogue individual model, which involves the idea of proceeding regardless of pre-established starting points, the second model is the trial or the process model, the third is the updating model, and the fourth one might be called the suspension of decision making model, or taking over fast and deciding later model, which I think has a lot of potential, and finally you have the transfer of responsibility model. So how do these models relate to the notion of failure?

The problem with the rogue individual model is that it relies on a certain articulacy, it reveals problems regarding the notion of the cultural producer as an articulate person, and it tends to undermine the potential of refusal. It also tends to rely on a structural system in order to generate critical meaning, whereas maybe the document archive should be destroyed, for example. The first model functions very much like the heroic main character from *Underground Man*. (*Un Fragment d'Histoire Future*, Gabriel Tarde) And, of course, it reveals problems in relation to key paradoxes in developed progressive thought, that is, in relation to the idea of individual agency and the issue of how to resolve the problem of knowing that if the revolution is inevitable, why do you have to do anything to make it happen?

The trial model is problematic too because it accentuates the idea of the unresolved tension between democracy and liberalism. The trial model tends to assume that there might be a kind of human nature, something like goodness. These are assumptions about human nature that I, along with many other people, don't think you can make.

The notion of merely updating cultural detailing may be too culturally specific, it relies on an examination of the dominant culture to make the idea of the updating meaningful. This centralising of the concept could be an enduring problem.

The notion of working with the model of continued suspension of decision-making draws us into an Adorno trap. So this model may have to be combined with something a little bit more destructive and challenging to the dominant culture, like taking over first and deciding later. In Berlin, in the mid 90s, there were a lot of discussions among a certain generation of people that about the idea that if you merely somehow create interesting contacts and attitudes, these, by their very nature (in a Toni Negri kind of way) will create new spontaneous communities of progressive thinking. New radical models will develop within the power structure if you allow for specific critical proximities. Of course this hasn't necessarily happened.

The 'transfer of responsibility' model might actually be one of the best ideas. A shift of power has to come with a shift of understanding about hierarchical positioning; who gets to do what when. You might not have any ideas, but you might be sure you don't want to leave a certain territory to other people.

Now, if we come back to modes of resistance and refusal once more we might need to look at some specific questions in relation to this. Like many of us, I've done shitty jobs, where you spend a lot of time and energy not working. I have found elaborate ways to not do anything all day, like painting with a screwdriver, or walking to pick up some materials instead of taking the car. I have done many things in order to avoid productive work and I actually don't mind when people are supposedly inefficient. On the other hand, we're living in a weird time, where, if it is as bad as they say, why don't we have a cultural boycott of America, for example? If you say that the war in Iraq is worse than Vietnam and this is really a nightmare, this is a new model of super-imperialism, then why are we not having a boycott? But the older generation often say that it's not the same as Vietnam in the end and anyway we can't have a boycott, they don't work. But I tell you if we were to decide that if there was an American at Unitednationsplaza they would not be welcome, it would have an effect. It worked in South Africa, a different situation, but it was very difficult for people; if you were South African, I'm sorry, you can't come. You may be a nice person on the right side, but tough shit. And this is another real option. To really concretely do something and not be swayed by Americans who feel that there is some Habermasian, enlightenment human essentialism at the heart of their culture. So I think the blurring is important, and indecision is important, these are all crucial, but we still have to ask ourselves some concrete questions.

Another thing I want to mention in relation to the theme of failure is the return of the words 'bourgeois' and 'bourgeoisie' in daily critical discussion. When I was a student, people didn't use these terms because they were old words from earlier discussions that were not necessarily pertinent to how to understand things at that point. We used terms such as left and right. But I have heard bourgeois used more and more over the last few years, partly because of the rise of critical theory in art schools. Now, what happens when these words come back? Tobias Meyer, who is head of contemporary art at Sotheby's, was speaking on Sunday morning at the Serpentine, and he talked about the return of the bourgeoisie – the rise of the bourgeoisie's interest in contemporary art – as the main engine of success and art market expansion. This was at the crux of his argument as to why this is not a cyclical boom, in his opinion, but a sustained situation, and this is also a way of talking his way out of a potential economic collapse in the auction houses. It is a claim that the bourgeoisie have become interested in

contemporary art in a concrete and new way that is a paradigm shift away from the old cyclical insecurities. So we have the return of the term Bourgeois in two distinct forms, as a critical word in the hands of the self-realised participants in the culture and as a vision of hope and way out of the cyclical collapses of opportunistic capital in the view of Tobias Meyer.

All of this leads me back to an anxiety about the use of a word like crisis in relation to contemporary art and unitednationsplaza. It can be perversely reassuring to people if you talk about crisis, because it assures a critical tone, has a certain authority about it and people smile and nod when they hear the word applied regardless of circumstances. The term seems to me the most coquettish now, an annoying thing to hear when one person after the other gets up and talks about crisis without changing anything about their behaviour or proposing any new models of activity. When we talk about the idea of crisis and failure, I think we have to be quite careful because it implies critique without necessarily being critical.

Last night I went over to the Guggenheim opening, to have a little schizo moment. I jumped in a taxi, went over there, had a glass of wine, and came straight back, just to check. The opening was packed with people I don't know, and I don't think many of them gave a shit about us sitting here at this Unitednationsplaza event. I look forward, at some point, to meeting some of them in this environment, once they are ready to be absorbed into a genuinely critical system. However I fear that the problem right now is the generalised coquettish use of phrases like crisis without caring to change the behaviour of the people who go to the Guggenheim without asking questions. I was about to mention Canada now, but I think it's probably better to go have a drink.