

Artist's Project – Will Stuart: An ongoing project by Will Holder and Stuart Bailey, TOURETTE's has taken the form of magazines, a series of lectures, films, readings and performances. As the title suggests, its aim has been to study the layers and pitfalls of communication. To coincide with TOURETTE's v, part of the 'Stutter' exhibition at Tate Modern that explores the way contemporary artistic practices "pivot around how thoughts unfold erratically in time and may fail to deliver rational discourse or clear images", TATE ETC. publishes recent correspondence between the two protagonists

An Exchange of Letters in Advance of TV

By Will Stuart

Dear Will,
You've been accusing me of repeating myself like a drunken bore, quoting me back at myself to make your point. This makes for very uncomfortable reading. Last night I came across the following (by David Foster Wallace) which summarises your accusations: "This is what happens: you imagine the things I will say and then say them for me and then become angry with them. Without my mouth; it never opens. You speak to yourself, inventing sides. This itself is the habit of children: lazy, lonely, self. I am not even here, possibly, for listening to."

Shall we step out of this closed loop? Stop quoting and try to understand enough to paraphrase each other instead, to work out how to proceed with TOURETTE's v (TV) by raking over the coals of previous editions.

Remember the note we wrote in the colophon of the first?: "TOURETTE's believe that a lot has been said already, and if we all keep trying to repeat and improve ourselves in new ways, some of the nicest things might get lost in the resulting pile." We needed an event to flag up that one's existence, which became TOURETTE's II (the word made flesh), eight evenings of performance, films, readings and talks, encouraged by a curator who recognised what we were up to was "adolescent" (stropky? self-righteous? reckless?). Thinking back reminds me how a lot of what we

haphazardly strung together had the same qualities we intended with the title: the uncontrolled tic of sudden, repetitive urges. So whether that excerpt from Michael Hanneke's film *The Third Continent* where a family systematically destroys their own house; the audio recording of a séance with Yves Klein bathed in wall-projector blue; or Paul Elliman's talk on fireworks with simultaneous demonstration and Chinese translation... all seemed to share a similar explosive release.

Which brings me to anticipate various forces at play behind the next, TOURETTE's v, another event, this time at Tate. I'd say our current interests are three-fold: The first relates to conversation, and this goes back at least as far as your paraphrasing John Cage: "A real conversation is when you don't know what the other person is going to say." Since our adolescent yammering, then working-apart-together, it's seemed necessary to set up these admittedly contrived conditions for a "real" conversation because (a) we now live on opposite sides of the world, slaves to the disorienting time- and energy-lags of email, and (b) to override the fact that communication among colleagues is increasingly paranoid, or poisoned by small-talk.

The second is to do with directness. We've always discussed a productive balance between clarity and obscurity in our own and others' work, and I'd say we still err by

default on the obscure side. Recently, though, we've been sending each other more direct, succinct, even brutal examples of writing which deal explicitly with the social conditions of their immediate past. Which we both wanted to communicate to those closer to home who don't make up our regular circle – parents and siblings, for example.

And the third is concerned with friendship. Both Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis have appeared more than once in previous TOURETTE's, and it seems useful to assemble some scaffolding around the fact that Stein's project was as pertinent for you as Lewis's was for me. Lewis repeatedly attacked Stein's work in public, and her response was silence, a refusal to acknowledge why Lewis set himself up as "The Enemy": with the idea that friends, being friends, are reluctant to upset you, and adjust the truth of their perceptions accordingly. In which case only enemies are truly to be trusted. *Et tu?*

Stuart

Dear Stuart,

Very telling that, towards the end of your letter you allow Gerty and Wyndy to enter stage like Mr and Mrs Punch. (By the way, did you know that Piesc – the General, in Stefan Themerson's story, who only finds happiness when he has forgotten his mission – is pronounced "punch" and means "fist" in Polish?) You then introduce notions of friends and enemies, and that friends are people who would never want to upset or confuse you, and "adjust the truth of their perceptions" in order to keep the peace. As you know, I feel that Wyndham Lewis's necessary "Enemy" in society is a typical twentieth-century idea of what it means to be "avant garde": over-exerting oneself in order to demonstratively destroy the previous generation's idea of progress (killing one's father), in order to secure one's own definition of progress.

In a recent interview that became more of a conversation, Vanessa asked me how I saw my (and our) work in relation to friendship, and pulled in H el ene Cixous by the hair (a close reader and friend of Derrida), who, on first reading, would seem to agree with the enemy-as-best-friend idea: someone who wants to halt your progress, arrest your development, and force you back into that insecure childish state of not-knowing-for-sure. Imagine finding a large black monolith in the middle of your garden path, stopping you from getting to work, and this being so demanding that you need to take a day off to understand why it's there. I'm not sure if this is as generous as Gertrude Stein's silence towards Wyndham Lewis, but I AM sure that the generosity is extended through her writing not pointing directly at something we all take for granted: that if you say "apple" you mean "the round fruit of the tree of the rose family, which typically has thin red or green skin and crisp flesh."

Stein is often accused of being repetitive (a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose), or in Lewis's words, "This child...

throws big, heavy words up and catches them; or letting them slip through its fingers, they break in pieces; and down it squats with a grunt, and begins sticking them together again. Else this fartointellectual infant chases the chosen word, like a moth, through many pages, worrying the delicate life out of it."

I would sooner say that this child is intensely observing the nature of each word by allowing it to be repeated within slightly different instances. Her care for the chosen word is demonstrated by her progressive use of it, observing how it becomes something else, putting it into new situations so its potential can be demonstrated. I can't imagine a word being "worried" by her overuse, I'd sooner say it must be happy to be that alive. A friend reminded me that human beings only use about 20% of the brain's potential capacity. Perhaps this is a better way of explaining how Stein wishes to extend the potential of language beyond its accepted capacities. Would you say her treatment and intentions are enemy or friend to the use of language? Is it friendly to spare people the use of their brains?

If we repeat a word often enough, it becomes meaningless. Write "apple" down a hundred times and you won't recognise it any more but you WILL be aware of it being unrecognisable. Couldn't we then consider words not as signs meant to be read-through (as invisible "carriers" of meaning) but as signs which stop the reading-through, in which reading becomes a stuttering inquiry into WHY text is on a page in the first place. John Cage said something like "a true friend is someone who confuses you", and someone told me recently that the idea of a relationship is when you "know" somebody. Not read through them to something beyond them that says "mother", "friend", "wife" or "girlfriend". Such knowledge does not have labels, and is the essence of friendship: allowing the other to be introduced to a blockage. A true friend will stop to get to know the blockage, most other people-on-a-mission will not want to spend time with it. Doesn't this have to do with what you nicely referred to as the cybernetics of conversation?

Will

Will,

While Stein remained silent, Virginia Woolf DID respond to one of Lewis's punches with kind of friendly exasperation: "for God's sake don't try to bend my writing one way or the other" – but it seems to me this was Lewis's unapologetic point, bending other people's stuff to fit his various arguments, repurposing it to stake his own philosophical claims:

"As to the UNIMPORTANCE of those I have chosen for attack... Well, in themselves, most of these 'enemies' are, of the most perfect unimportance. But they are rather IDEAS than people... the names of notions, associated with other (and far more powerful) notions. In the influence they exert it would, be foolish to deny their

‘importance.’” Lewis’s criticisms were concerned with a general drift into what he called “Time-philosophy”, and Stein’s writing was merely a literary embodiment of this form of thinking he felt amounted to a kind of cultural brainwashing – one he attempted to reveal and perhaps reverse. Lewis called on her work as evidence for his prosecution, which is why there’s always gratitude in his mockery.

By his own later reckoning, however, Lewis wrote about things “which only a handful of people in England know or care about... I might as well have been talking to myself all the time and that’s a fact.”

This very self-AWARENESS is really Lewis’s defining quality, and legacy, for me. He frankly admits his adoption of the “father-killing Avant-garde persona”, but only as one of the many he encouraged (“leave your front door one day as B: the next march down the street as E”). For Lewis writing was a “character” that one assumed in justification of one’s “actual” work. He later complained of Stein’s refusal to come “out-of-character” and address her readers in a more conventional voice, detached from that of “the work”. This was the essence of what he found “fraudulent” and (to use the current pejorative catchword of US politics) “elitist” in Stein. I wonder how you feel about this accusation concerning the lack of plain-speaking ABOUT (rather than WITHIN) her art in such as her *Composition as Explanation*. How does this square with the “generosity” you claim for her?

Actually, let me try and anticipate your answer: that it’s generous inasmuch as it forces the reader to experience the “difficulty” of the new form, to work through it, and to “understand” – feel, appreciate, absorb – by DOING. This is Calvino’s argument in the *Cybernetics and Ghosts* essay you sent me last week, how the labyrinthine writing of Borges, for example, is deliberately designed to disorient, to lose the reader, in order that their effort of RE-orientation has its own aesthetic payoff, or as he describes, “a kind of training for survival”. This is more prosaically put in Mancunian by Ryan Gander along the lines of “a work means so much more when you get it yourself, when it’s not handed to you on a plate.” Aren’t we talking about enlightenment, and about the value of experience over convenience?

In a favourite anecdote of mine, a writer recounts building a puppet theatre for his children in such a way that he can see their faces as they watch the “stage” – a cardboard box propped up on the back of the couch. During the play’s violent climax he clumsily knocks the whole thing over while still watching his children, and notes how their expressions switch from surprise to shock to hilarity as they realise how easily they’ve been tricked, absorbed into the setup. Lewis would call this the realisation of “the incredible false bottom that underlies every seemingly solid surface”. The father’s profound observation, though, is that for the first time observing his own children during this split-second loss of innocence he saw that “only laughter could steel them in their new awareness.” I wonder how

the collapse of the cardboard box frame and narrative puppets on his wrists might relate to Stein’s writing. Would you say her famously writing in the “continuous present” is both at once, a flattening of the division between form and content? And is there anything “hilarious” about it?

Stuart

Dear Reader,

I hope you’re still with us. I had expected Stuart to be wearing his editor’s hat: keeping you in mind and correcting our course which I intentionally deflected with a denser block to demonstrate my point. Remember: I am not the only reader he is writing to.

I will assure you: his natural editing ability is demonstrated best when Stuart speaks, and he seems to be much calmer when he wants to tell you something face to face. I, on the other hand, always want to say too much when speaking publicly, and often make a stammering and fumbling fool of myself.

I can imagine that you understand Wyndham Lewis’s changes of character (“blasting” enemies and “blessing” friends), just as you can appreciate how difficult it must be to only have two hands when articulating the Crocodile, the Policeman, the Butcher, the Baker as well as Mr Punch and Judy. Let alone get all the different voices right. This is something we all do every day, of course: adopt different tones of voice depending on who we’re talking to – when ordering your dinner, or asking the newsagent to send you the *Herald Tribune* or *Daily Express* every morning, for example. We’re unaware of this very social gesture 99% of the time, but I think it should be pointed out that Wyndham Lewis was certainly “talking to himself” when he imagines Stein as being unable to adapt her voice: “She would roll her eyes, squint, point in a frenzy at some object, and, of course, stammer hard. She would play up to the popular ignorance as to the processes by which her picture had been arrived at, in short. She would answer ‘in character’, implying that she was cut off from the rest of the world entirely by an exclusive and peculiar sensibility.”

In fact, one only has to read her *Lectures in America* to understand that contrary to being “cut off”, Stein was rather pre-occupied with whoever was listening. Her writing displayed a continuous esteem and estimation of this audience, understanding that – much like the activating position of a verb in a sentence – one must change one’s case in acknowledgement of the surrounding words. The subtitle of her novel *The Making of Americans*..., “... Being a History of a Family’s Progress”, can be read as a small model, 99% of which IS, following Lewis’s idea, “unimportant” to most. However, you HAVE to live with that family, become friends and give them your time if you want to understand the 1% that makes them different from their neighbours.

Please note the use of “different” as opposed to “better”, “one-up” or “important”. Understanding that the

course of this “History of a Family” depends on every member, then could we say that history FALLS OUT OF CHARACTER, has no single author, is out of any-one’s control.

It seems to me that Stein is attempting to get us to understand that the machine of writing, of recording, is one that needs to be understood in terms of time (at once momentary and infinite) and pushed to its extreme (can it get worse than *Celebrity Big Brother?*) in order to result in a simpler, more human state of correspondence, without the need to name names. The apparent futility of recording the history of ONE family over a thousand pages is more palpably a demonstration of your participation IN those pages, and how we ARE all oiling – and oil in – the machine. By reducing the machine’s components to smaller units (words) that remind us of their flexibility through banal repetition, Stein points out how reading and writing is something we all do with different levels of care – and that these levels can change, according to the optimistic, reductive simplicity of the modernist programme? Or should that be program?

Stuart?

Dear Will,

It seems to me that all our mis-firings during these letters (which don’t forget, Dear Reader, have been edited out or at least smartened up before you read them) prove the point we’re flailing to make here. When I haven’t followed something you’ve written, or shared something you assume we’ve mutually taken for granted, surely the feedback of your realising or my telling as much amounts to those cybernetics of conversation you mentioned, rather than cause for frustration. For example:

I’m with your last letter all the way until the middle of the last paragraph, where I stall, re- and reread, and this time repetition isn’t working. By the time you’re after “a simpler, more human state of correspondence”, you’ve (ironically) lost me. So let me try and paraphrase what I think is being said using my clunky abc’s, and you can adjust where appropriate. You’re saying the aim is (a) to encourage an audience to participate in reading and speaking that emphasises HOW and WHY things are being said as well as WHAT, that (b) this very activity CONSTITUTES knowledge rather than generates it, and will (c) make for a community that, however local or general, takes better care of what and how they communicate; is in short more CONSIDERATE – in all stuttering nuances of the word. If so, I would certainly agree.

This morning I noticed something I’d overlooked, or maybe avoided, in one of your older letters. I mention it here as a great example of an apparent contradiction that hopefully illustrates (a!) the need for clarity, even overstating the obvious, because I didn’t understand what you were getting at; but then (b!) precisely BECAUSE of this lack of clarity, I went through a little DIS- and RE-

orientation myself, and having done so, now more clearly understand the “machine” you write of.

The letter begins with Lewis’s portrayal of Stein (negatively) as a child chasing the moth of language, which you then equate this with the machine Calvino (positively) writes of. Namely, language as the device which will record: “Some day then there will be a history of every one and every thing that ever is was or will be...” – a self-stuttering literary device as an end in itself, rather than one that imparts information in a journalistic sense. You add that Lewis probably couldn’t, or wouldn’t, accept this notion of the machine as metaphor for social construction: the idea that a forced awareness of and sensitivity to the nuts and bolts of a condition (here language, but by implication equally community or country) automatically leads to a questioning of it.

The other evening Frances was asking me why, if Lewis apparently speaks to my temperament and Stein to yours, I felt the need to ask you to “explain” Stein to me. This would seem to be the worst kind of didacticism we typically dislike in an institution of the Tate’s scale: “It’s on display so it must be good... but tell me (again) why I should appreciate it...?” But it’s precisely because I “know” you beyond the mere label “friend” – and because the conversation is difficult and draining if not downright irritating that I suspect something important can be drawn from it. What you say about how calmly I can speak is EXACTLY why I trust there’s something I can learn from Stein – as an attempt to evolve.

When speaking “in public”, I’m increasingly conscious of repeating myself to the point where I start to wonder whether I still believe what I’m saying while I’m saying it. This is the same apprehension you describe in relation to Stein: words burnt-out through overuse, with no relation to what might actually cross my mind if I REALLY stopped to think. And so I need a tool to unhinge myself.

HOWEVER, thinking aloud, or attempting to operate on a permanent feedback loop can surely cause both stuttering and insanity, so there has to be some kind of healthier balance. I think it’s called “well-adjusted”. The well-adjusted Deleuze spoke of his teaching as an immense amount of preparation towards a single (and by no means guaranteed) moment of insight. His lectures wouldn’t be planned as such, but rather organised towards the possibility of his students witnessing a thought being formed in front of them, live. Isn’t this in line with Stein’s (and our) “continuous present”?

x

‘Stutter’, Tate Modern, Level 2 Gallery, 20 March – 7 June, curated by Vanessa Desclaux and Nicholas Cullinan.

Will Stuart is the compound name of Will Holder and Stuart Bailey. Holder is an artist, designer and writer. He is currently editing a book on Falke Pisano for the Henry Moore Institute and Christoph Keller Editions. Stuart Bailey is a graphic designer and co-editor of Dot Dot Dot magazine. He is based in New York.