

The stranger in our midst – on making ‘For you, only you’

SLIDE

In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.

Sol Le Witt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, Artforum, June 1967

SLIDE BLANK (spoken)

The suggestion here is that intelligent art originates from a pre-formed ‘creative idea’, and registers, for all who encounter the work, as evidence of the artist’s ability to define, control – or at least manage, the realms of creativity.

This dictate from Sol Le Witt remains the defining perception of contemporary fine art practice: that the artist’s intention, from the outset, is the measure of the work.

To know beforehand was the main framework of my art training in the late 1970s/early 1980s. A model of working that I slowly abandoned by the mid-1990s to delve into the messier field of collaborations and participation.

MOVIE

1st clip: the way I work (titles) – stepping back

SLIDE BLANK (spoken)

When I was invited to make a work at Oxford University, my first intention quickly collapsed once I was introduced to the early music choir at Magdalen College. My intention had been to set up a choir clash between two choral groups, but this seemed too destructive and contrived an idea.

After meeting David Skinner, then Musical Director at Magdalen College, and now a Musical Director here at Cambridge – who was very intrigued about working with a visual artist – it took me a long time to reconfigure the possibilities. About 8 months later I met sound artist Mikhail Karikis. His style of working is miles away from early Renaissance music, but I was curious to see whether something interesting could come out of this collaboration. So I began without having any idea of what we were going to do.

MOVIE

3rd clip: introducing

SLIDE BLANK (spoken)

It was pretty clear that members of the group were bemused by my involvement, in particular that I have little knowledge of classical music from a professional standpoint, but more to the point, from a cultural perspective. They were also uncertain of the diverse spheres of sound production that were being brought together.

MOVIE

4th clip: marriage of differences

SLIDE

The stranger is thus discussed here, not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the

beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.

George Simmel, "Essay about the Stranger" ("Exkurs über den Fremden," 1908)

SLIDE BLANK (spoken)

Many have asked
"what did you do, Sonia?"
Gentle persuasion is now my answer.

Like most of my projects I realise that 'strategically' I am parasitic: that I embed myself within the fabric of what is taking place, often in the background, in order to witness and make an assessment of what is taking place.

It took over a year for the team to arrive at a final piece of work: And, with equally appropriative strategies Mikhail Karikis composed a new composition based on a piece by Josquin Desprez

David Skinner brought in his own team of professional choral singers Alamire, and worked on the musical score with Mikhail

And, I worked with a film crew headed by David Bickerstaff to make a three-screen video installation of the performance.

MOVIE

5th clip: not too foreign

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Two years after completing the project, my understanding of the final piece – and a clear instance of what my former tutors would have disparagingly called 'post-intentionality' – I've recognised that 'For you, only you' demonstrates the negotiations of the

stranger to create a space for themselves and to confront the host. It also highlights the impact that the stranger has upon the host, and the host's eventual willingness to enter into a productive dialogue with difference. In that sense, it could be seen as a utopian work, optimistic about the negotiation of different agendas.

MOVIE

6th clip: FYOY