

This essay is part of the publication
Trans-Actions (2009)

ISBN 978 90 71346 378

Publishers Kristiina Koskentola & Thousand & One Publishers

The publication can be ordered from
www.1001publishers.com
info@1001publishers.com

More information:
<http://www.kristiinakoskentola.nl/trans-actions.html>

Epilogue

Lost and Found: Conversations, Connections and Confusions

Mika Hannula

What follows is an act of articulation that will do three things at the same time. An act that starts off from the work of Kristiina Koskentola and the three texts relating to and reflecting that special body of work and the inherent beautiful openings embedded in it. This effort serves as an epilogue, aiming again at doing three things parallel to one another. An act that is a combination of conversations, connections and confusions. Never as one, but always as a constantly evolving process. A process that is not about trivialities. Instead, it is an act of writing with, talking with, walking with, arguing with, struggling with and ultimately, being with.

As I hope it has already become clear, this effort of *doing with* is, of course, exercised in three interrelated episodes. Episodes that are connected to each of the texts, but which then move on towards a life of their own. These themes are: misunderstandings, the concept of abject and cultural representations of ugliness, and memory and how memory is constructed. An exercise that will end with a conceptual scheme that promises even more definitions, and that starts with the wonderfully round and elegant letter C.

But let us begin with misunderstandings. A concept, and a daily reality that immediately comes across in the discussion between Kristiina and Carol Yinghua Lu: a description of sites and situations that we face anywhere and everywhere. Misunderstandings that we need not go looking for: they tackle and disturb us without asking for permission to do so.

But what are we talking about when we are talking about misunderstandings? This is truly an honest dilemma that can, for the sake of the argument, be divided into two different versions. These would be a version of misunderstandings as a technical vehicle for use and abuse of power positions, and contrary to that, a potential beginning of a beginning of a relationship that would allow difference talking to a difference

without forcing the negotiations into a hierarchical prepaid order. To purposely play with abbreviations, I will label the former as MU₁, and its diametrically opposite version as MU₂. To make it clear: what I see and what I talk and walk with in and through the projects of Kristiina refers to the latter version of MU₂.

But in order to be logically sound and safe, we should first deal with MU₁. This is an understanding of constantly occurring misunderstandings as failure and mistake. This version believes that behind all that annoying mess there is, sorry, let me rephrase it, there simply *must* be a single set of rules of the game that settles everything. Thus, it is a strictly top-down version of misunderstandings that requires a great deal of energy to convince oneself and others that misunderstandings occur because the others fail to comprehend the issue or the complexity of the theme. This is a notion of misunderstanding that suggests that, if and when we all would just understand correctly what's going on and what's needed, misunderstandings would not happen.

It is a version that positions itself within the power game of who gets to decide what is that one single version of rules and regulations that every civilised person is expected to respect and to follow. Needless to say, this version is then believed to be adequate everywhere, hence universal, and not so surprisingly, it represents the inherent values and wants of the position from which it is spoken, while camouflaging precisely this value-laden and biased position is regarded as objective and neutral. In this sense misunderstanding is just another item and hurdle on the road to and from hegemony and dominance.

What about MU₂? How is it different? Let me first recall a personal experience, not unlike one of Kristiina's. Last year I had the opportunity to curate an exhibition (*Night On Earth*, Moca) and to participate in a seminar (8th Biennial) in Shanghai. Both times, I quickly realised that in order to survive there (in Shanghai), one must come to terms with never-ending misunderstandings. The second time I was prepared, but the first time it was a shock, and let me emphasise it: a positive shock. It took me perhaps 2 hours, 23 minutes and 24 seconds to realise that here you either go with the flow and learn how to enjoy it, or you try to fight against it and you sink very, very fast.

With the flow I not only mean the sweaty, hectic and chaotic urban life of Shanghai, but the very act of misunderstandings that occur non-stop in most instances of communication. These happen when you ask for advice on the street corner, when you order food, when you try to talk with the technician at the museum, or when you don't want to answer the innocent question where you are from. A long chain of instances where people are very polite and friendly but where nothing is understood in the frame of $1 + 1$ makes 2. In these processes, the sum is somewhere in the region of $1 \frac{3}{4}$ or $2 \frac{1}{2}$.

And, more importantly, these are instances where you recognise very soon that they are laughing at you. You don't really know why they are laughing, or what they are laughing about, but soon enough you decide that you don't care. You decide to get into the groove of the interaction but in doing so, to keep a sceptical distance. It is about admitting that, well, whatever, you don't know what's going on but who care's, you are still convinced about what you want to do and achieve at that site, with all the difficulties and within the mess. You want to swim, not drown. Thus, to go with the flow is that yes, you join in with the laughter and make the site an act not of laughing *at* but of laughing *with*. You surprise yourself and them.

Because that is what defines MU₂: It is the profound recognition of the inevitability of misunderstandings that are more visible and on your face in relationships with the other/others far out there, but which exists in all human situations whether they are between you and your father, you and your partner, your children or within yourself. MU₂ is about recognising and respecting the fact that who we are and what we see and feel depends on where we do something; this is understood in close connection to the version of past – present – future, and how we narrate our relationship with these elements. MU₂ understands misunderstandings as a chance: instead of trying to force everything into a prepaid and precast mould and formula, you go on with the flow and let the differences simply be differences; not differences that fight one another, but differences (as in views and opinions that range all the way from taste of clothes and pop muzak to harder collisions on politics and religion) that care and caress each other in the continuous give and take of laughing with.

So what about the number 2 of the list of three? Rubén de la Nuez reminds us in a fantastically imaginative manner of the ongoing process of normalisation through mass media products that we are terrorised by. This is neither an abstract theoretical version of the abject, nor is it a predominantly personal experience of it, but a quintessentially mediated version of commoditised products that pretends to address the other side of beauty and normality, but with great dedications ends up just churning out more of the same. There is no other, no difference, no distortion that talks back. All that is left is that cruel white noise of a commercial product jamming the airways.

Here I refer to the in the first place not very interesting TV series *Ugly Betty*. A product that becomes to signify much more than it promises when we pay attention to the details of interplanetary connotations. A product that has invaded most of our homes with its US version, but which in itself is a copy of the original Columbian TV series – and which has its own re-make in the world of TV commodities in China. The question bounces back to the main issue: what is ugliness, and how and by whom is this defined?

And here, despite that the logic of a mass culture product such as a commoditised and completely predefined TV show denies any chance of hick-ups and grey areas, the act of producing a re-make, a copy, shows that something always happens in between. It is the zone of misunderstandings – as in productive consequences – that even the smartest totalitarian capitalists can't completely control and manipulate. This is the hick-up where the audience acts and shouts back.

This is where the sum of the game does not even come close to breaking even: something is constantly overflowing, or left terribly empty. But you do sense that something is happening, something is on the move? There is a cough inside the mighty machine, and that's where things get deep down and dirty. This is where our expectations and views which we take for granted are violently shaken, not just slightly stirred. And, that is, like with Kristiina's actions in the Gobi desert, that is precisely the point when things get really interesting, demanding and challenging. That's when you no longer know what exactly is happening, and how. A site and a situation where you have no other option than to admit that you are part of the mess, part of the problem.

Moving on to issue number three out of three, the topic of memory. A topic that underlines the interrelatedness of almost every aspect that is brought to a site and results in a productive questioning of being-with. This is then a notion of memory that is shaped in-between the negotiations and navigations of questioning which version of the past is narrated and maintained, how that version plays along or against the situated self's story of the present and, finally, how both the past and the present shape a possible version of the future that is imagined and either wished for or feared. It is a collision of expectations and hints of experiences. That disappearing feeling of learning how to lose but also of learning how to generate an adequate sense of balance in order to be able to act.

This is the very crucial in-betweenness that begs to question not what it is but how that grey area of give-and-take is generated at each site and situation. A distinction that causes the heart-breaking recognition of the necessity for actualization of the act. There are no answers, there are no solutions – just locally anchored and embedded comprehensions of the responsibility to act right here, and right now. It is that back-and-forth movement between being too close and too distant; movement from anticipation to hesitation; movement from no distance at all to any imaginable connection. A movement that comes in all shapes and colours of the rhythms, from fast and furious staccato to a tango, that if it has a rhythm, that rhythm goes backwards.

A notion that allows me another anecdote and a detour. This time, instead of Shanghai, we are in Helsinki. In my case, dating to the end of the 1990s, at a site that definitely still exists. Not so very surprisingly, it is a bar, or in its own description it is a nightclub. A premise with a formidable name that says it all: *Lost & Found*. A site I came across with my personal in-betweenness – due both to the lack of quality and the overwhelming quantity of alcohol. It is a bar that is labelled as gay bar. However, especially on the ground level, where most visitors are served, it has gained an old-fashioned meaning of the word “gay”. Instead of referring to a sexual preference, it rather refers to the specific gayness: a strange kind of happiness that the customers storming in possess.

This story has a proper structural element. It is a bar that is open until 3.30 a.m. Especially in the wintertime, you witness the scene of a col-

lective rush of people fighting for a place to make their final orders. It is a scene of excess, a scene of a certain kind of semi-violent but funny in-betweenness. If you order just one drink, this is not a cool and serious order. The point is that even if the last orders must be placed at that given time, the customers can stay for one more hour, nursing their drinks as extremely valuable treasures that greatly expand the in-betweenness of staying awake and falling into a coma. On one terrifyingly thirsty occasion, I believe my personal record is 4 pints of beers topped with 2 shots of vodkas – all of course for me, myself and I. I recall a case of someone ordering 12 gin and tonics but I guess that doesn't count: those were meant for 2 people.

The immediate results of this self-defeating visit to *Lost & Found* stresses something essential about the act and actualization of dealing with memory – both in an individual and a collective sense. It is not only about facts, but rather about how we understand and experience those facts in given situations. Neither is it about collecting and saving, since that ultimately leads into a cul-de-sac of hysterias of trying to gain and gather everything under one roof. As with any relationship, memory can not exist without a counter-partner in crime. There is no active memory without forgetting.

But as ever, it is about how we forget. And here the difference is as important as it is demonstrative. It is the distinction within forgetting as the distinction between amnesia and amnesty. The former is the passive type that simply floats along and does not participate in the constructions of narrative of and with the past. On the contrary, amnesty is a version of forgetting that remembers while it forgives. It forgives in order not to get stuck on the black-and-white version of good and evil. It forgives in order to be able to move on – to keep on going. It is an active understanding of being-with that does not deny the past, but searches for ways of living and loving with it.

At the end, yes, at the end of the end, I will return to the promise of more conceptual Cs. I started with the idea of navigating with the lights of conversations, connections and confusions. Never as general but always as particular ones with temporary but very effective characters. Now it is high time to fulfill that promise that articulates the basic notions of being-with that have been talked about and walked with

here in terms of misunderstandings, normalisation and memory. This is the world according to 6 Cs. We have already addressed the idea of the productive nature of being confused. The others in this context are: contextual, conflictual, contested and constructed. If we now collectively count out loud: one, two, three, four plus five as in “confused”, we are still missing one. What is the one missing C? Is it cacophony? No. Is it celebration? No, that’s a fabulous song by Kool and the Gang. Well, what is it, then?

The missing link in the six-member gang of Cs is compassionate. A notion that in the end either makes this be and become a credible and comprehensive version of being-with. We need hearts and minds, we need commitment and we need passion. This push-and-pull site and situation must burn and it must heal. We can think with and talk with all we want but until we feel with it is not yet there. Not as a potentiality, not as a chance for the meeting as a loving conflict, for the clash and collision of being-with to become that singularity of a thisness in a specific place.