

THIS IS TOMORROW, MAY, 2015

this is tomorrow

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Chisenhale Gallery, 64 Chisenhale Road, London E3

Ahmet Ögüt: Happy Together: Collaborators Collaborating



Title : Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, 2015. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery as part of How to work together.

Website : <http://chisenhale.org.uk/>

Credit : Courtesy the artist. Photo Mark Blower.



Ahmet Ögüt: Happy Together: Collaborators Collaborating

Chisenhale Gallery

29 April - 31 May 2015

Review by David Price

This review takes the form of a set of notes on Ahmet Ögüt's 'Happy Together: Collaborators Collaborating', a commission produced for Chisenhale Gallery, London. The project itself takes the form of an opening event, a filmed central discussion event, and finally the presentation of this film which forms an exhibition. The reviewer was not present at this central discussion; had he been he would perhaps have appeared in the footage. This review therefore attends, and attends to, the exhibition, but not to its 'main event'. It mediates a mediation. These kinds of considerations of presence/absence are not irrelevant to the project's discourse.

Rather than being an exhibition with 'events' and moments of additional discourse added to its programme, Ahmet Ögüt's 'Happy Together' is a project generated by and consisting of such components. It forms a retrospective staged via the bringing together of a number of the artist's past collaborators. These include a sports-caster, a hairdresser, a mixologist, an auctioneer, a stuntman, all of whom were participants in previous works, and are both participants in, and the materials of, the present work.

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The project begins in advance of the exhibition 'itself', being open as a space for the viewer to navigate. During the first evening, at what might usually be the opening of the exhibition, the schema and cast of collaborative characters are introduced during the course of a concert given by the band Fino Blendax, with whom Ögüt has previously collaborated. The concert is titled as a work, 'Reverb', which was also performed at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. The gallery space is arranged as a quasi-theatrical stage, at either side of which members of the band (including the artist himself) will play. In the centre there are vertical panels on which videos are projected. On other vertical panels there are the same pencil drawings of the collaborators that appear in the booklet accompanying the project, drawn in a style recognisable from the artist's earlier work.

Before the band take to the stage Andrea Phillips, professor in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, speaks. She introduces the project, the collaborators, and the discourse that will be produced. She will chair a discussion between the participants a few days hence, between Ögüt's previous collaborators; a discussion that Ögüt himself will be in the audience of, but will not participate in. This event is the project's central one, as it will be filmed. This resulting footage will be quickly edited and become the video screened in the (reconfigured) space days later.

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So, rather than a visually or spatially composed exhibition that might gather additional discussion and events around it, this exhibition is to be produced by conversation. Furthermore, the presence of Ögüt's previous collaborators in this production (re-producing or repurposing their previous involvements) suggest that a retrospective of sorts is taking place. This brings to mind the idea of the retrospective-by-other-means that was initiated on a multi-institutional scale by Rirkrit Tiravanija in 2004/5 ('Tomorrow is Another Fine Day'); where the artist's temporal or situation-based works were not re-shown, nor presented as documentation, but instead were presented as textual recollections. In Ögüt's case the notion of the traditional retrospective is equally disregarded, but in a less programmatic manner; the 'absence' of the work is not staged. Instead, the notion is put forward that the work is present in the guise of the collaborators. Or, perhaps, that a new work is being made on the subject of collaboration.

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The band begin to play, performing a series of songs each dedicated to one of the collaborators. Ögüt makes these dedications between the songs; and he is present with the band on stage. A video backdrop runs for each song, drawing on previous works (for example, footage related to the work 'Pleasure Places of All Kinds', which depicts 'nail houses' left standing in the middle of otherwise excavated or developed areas). Retrospection is taking place, amidst a live event, the works expansively escorted by the artist into new presentations. Artworks are welcomed personally, so to speak.

A few days later, the exhibition 'itself' is open, following traditional gallery hours. The space has been entirely reconfigured, darkened, and opened out. Some components remain, in different positions. The projector remains facing the same way, and various other mobile wooden panels are placed to the side of the large projection screen. These panels display images documenting the various projects that the exhibition records and discusses.

In the video now being projected – the thing that is most identifiably the 'artwork' produced by and for this exhibition – the discussions that took place here a few days ago are recorded. The video is quite tightly edited, partially in the manner of a studio-based television programme somewhere between a talk-show and a gently inquisitive version of more confessional television. The 'presenter' is indeed Andrea Phillips, who introduced the project at its initial performance evening. The cast of Ögüt's previous collaborators are assembled on a set of cushioned steps, which now form the seating for the audience of the video. The audience for the discussions is occasionally seen in the video, one of whom is Ögüt, sometimes laughing warmly when the collaborations are discussed. Some of the conversations take place on the cushioned steps, some around a table, or in other parts of the set. Phillips is a mobile presenter, configuring herself with the collaborators rather differently to the way one would as the convener of an academic discussion, or a 'usual' gallery discussion evening to accompany an exhibition.

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A descriptive but also ethical concern arises in writing this review of the exhibition: should the reviewer describe the 'work' presented here, or should one use this work as an interface in order to describe the collaborations the work itself describes? And should, therefore, the reviewer describe in detail these collaborators as practitioners in their own right? Phillips' questions to them are personal, in the sense of talking about themselves, and their feelings about the collaborative process, and its interaction and conflict with the skills that their 'day jobs' provided for the collaborations? Certain formal and professional ironies present themselves – for example the fireman, Jaakko Liesivouro, who took part in the project ('Fahrenheit 451: Reprinted') where banned books were printed and distributed.

Who, in fact, is speaking through whom? In fact, in her role as a presenter in the video recording, is Phillips now added to list of collaborators from whom a future such exhibition of Ögüt's might be drawn? Towards the end of the film's conversations she asks the collaborators about the extent to which they felt like artists themselves as a result of working with Ögüt. Many insist that the works' agency remains with the artist, and that they were doing their job by participating with him. In the section of the film presenting questions from the audience one person (the Guardian's arts correspondent Charlotte Higgins, I think) asks a similar question of Phillips, who says that in the case of the filmed conversation she is the artist.

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In the spirit of the rather friendly and non-interrogative discussions recorded, these questions remain very open. The conclusions presented are perhaps not so interesting in their own right – that an artist who had made a great number of diverse projects with diverse people makes work that results in a diverse number of outcomes. Conclusions such as these seem scarcely the point. A subtle game is played with Ögüt's non-participation in the conversations – the question of the 'correct' amount of presence and authorship that belongs to Ögüt and the collaborator respectively is raised in conversation with Peter Zuiderwijk, for example, a designer who worked with Ögüt both on the present project and his exhibition 'Forward!' at the Van Abbemuseum. The response to this is inconclusive, precisely because Ögüt can't be asked himself, so the question is left unanswered. The exercise, clearly, is not to establish facts or to catalogue the works discussed, but instead (as Phillips says) to collect together feelings about the collaborations.

The total effect is to quite playfully and extravagantly hold the hands of the work; sharing its occurrence; and using a retrospective form to quite deliberately 'conclude' inconclusively works that had already been concluded in their usual form, having taken place in the past (this project does not lend itself to straightforward explanations). The original works, in fact, are present in a way that is rather hard to grasp – they are the anecdotal material that produces the current exhibition; they are topics of conversation but are not indexed or catalogued in any truly formal way. For a project that is so discursive, and which is made from discursive materials, and which is furthermore 'about' collaborations with practitioners drawn from fields other than art, it is interesting that it remains so hermetically sealed within the gallery space. It sets up a complex game, where warm congeniality is made both open and closed for the viewer. If, indeed the viewer of the film is the true viewer of the work; it may well be that the film records both the work and its viewers (in the form of the filmed audience). Uncertain statuses such as these are, seemingly, the intention of the exhibition (and produce, in turn, a review text that barely mentions the works 'themselves'; a fitting ambiguity). The artist goes about his restless, diverse series of practices, forming new combinations of discourse and action, which might at any time be recombined. The film produced by this work might in turn be the subject of a future partial-retrospective, in which its participants might be reunited to discuss its workings, and so on ...

'Happy Together' is, if taken as being a retrospective, highly informal, but if taken as being a new work in the spirit of those works it contains, then it has a certain formal precision. It is not so much socially-engaged as social itself, with all of the inconclusiveness this implies.

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