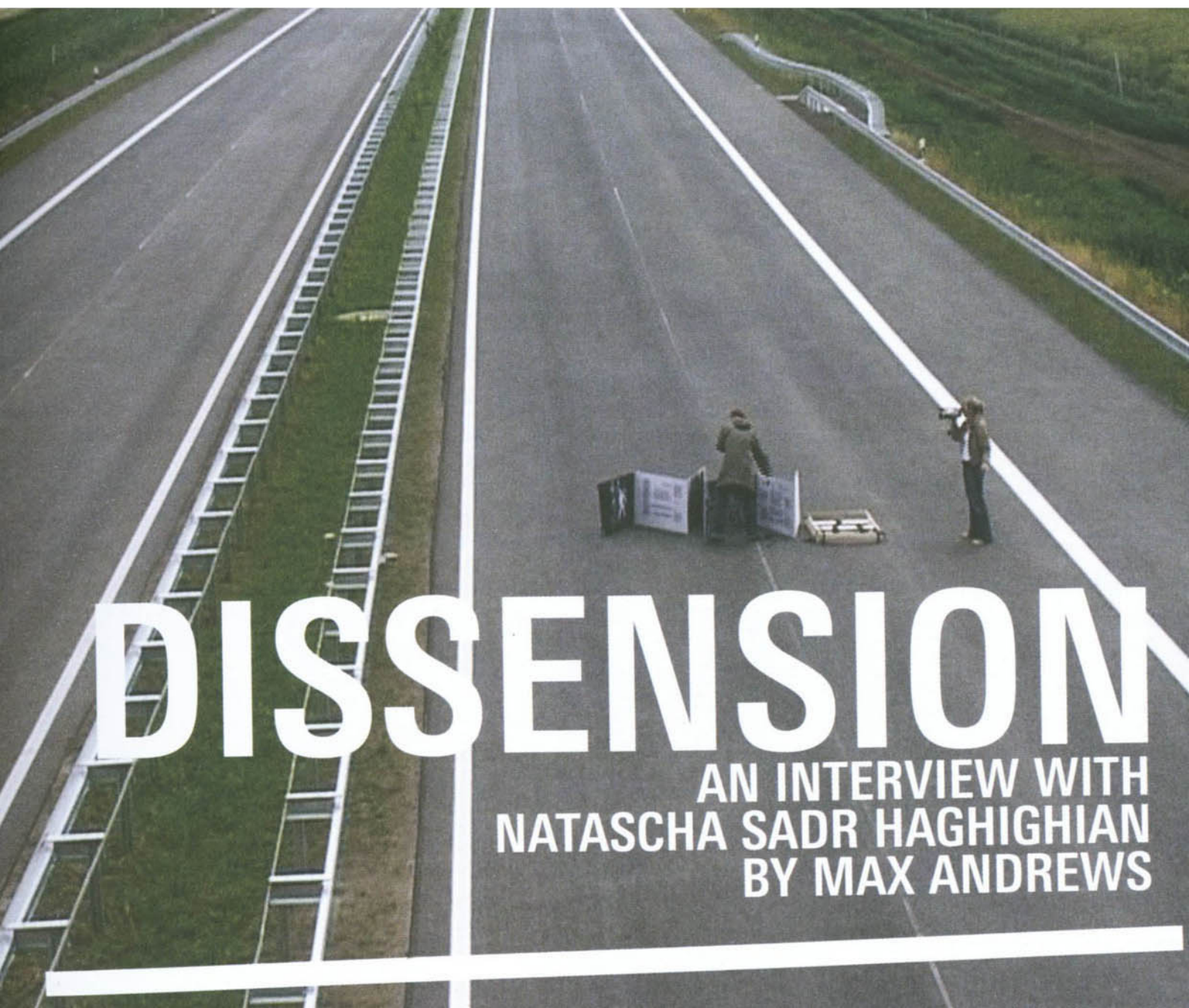




Dissension. An interview with Natascha Sadr Haghghian by Max Andrews. In: Uovo, #12, Turin, December 2006.



DISSENSION

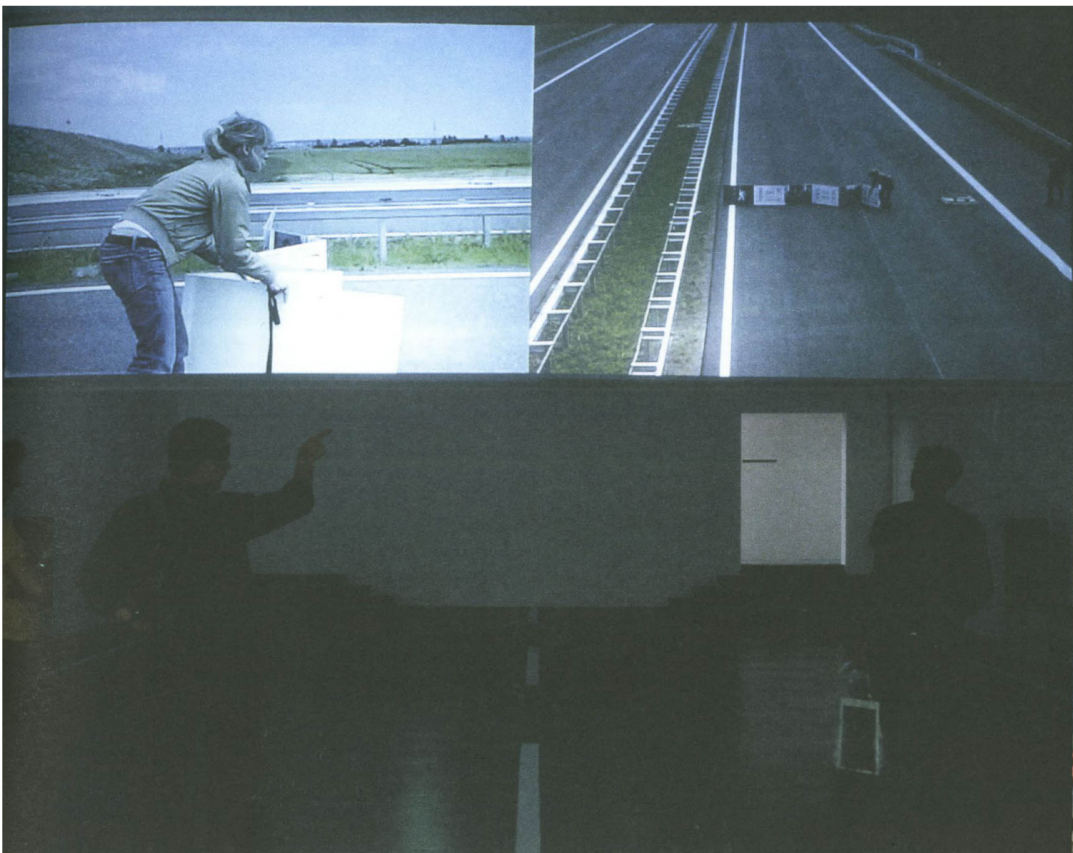
AN INTERVIEW WITH
NATASCHA SADR HAGHIGHIAN
BY MAX ANDREWS

The practice of Berlin-based artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian is often concerned with the dispersal of representational structures, and has taken the form of videos, actions, animation and sound installation. The performance and video *Present but not yet active* (2002), for example, looked at the dilemma of visibility and authenticity through the work of Bernhard Grzimek, who rebuilt Frankfurt zoo after World War II. The artist's animation *The making of islands* (2001), depicting a spotlight prison courtyard or stage describes a key operation in her practice. To oversimplify, it often corrals a set of concerns and illuminates them intensely. Where so much art practice is at pains to describe itself as open-ended and casual, it seems that the artist deliberately takes an opposite strategy by analysing the use of power inherent in a point of view. Another manifestation of this is her initiation of Bioswop (www.bioswop.net), an internet platform for curriculum vitae exchange where artists and other practitioners can borrow or lend their biographies for different purposes. The following exchanges took place over email during the artist's Guest Professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of Umeå and during the final days of her exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna.



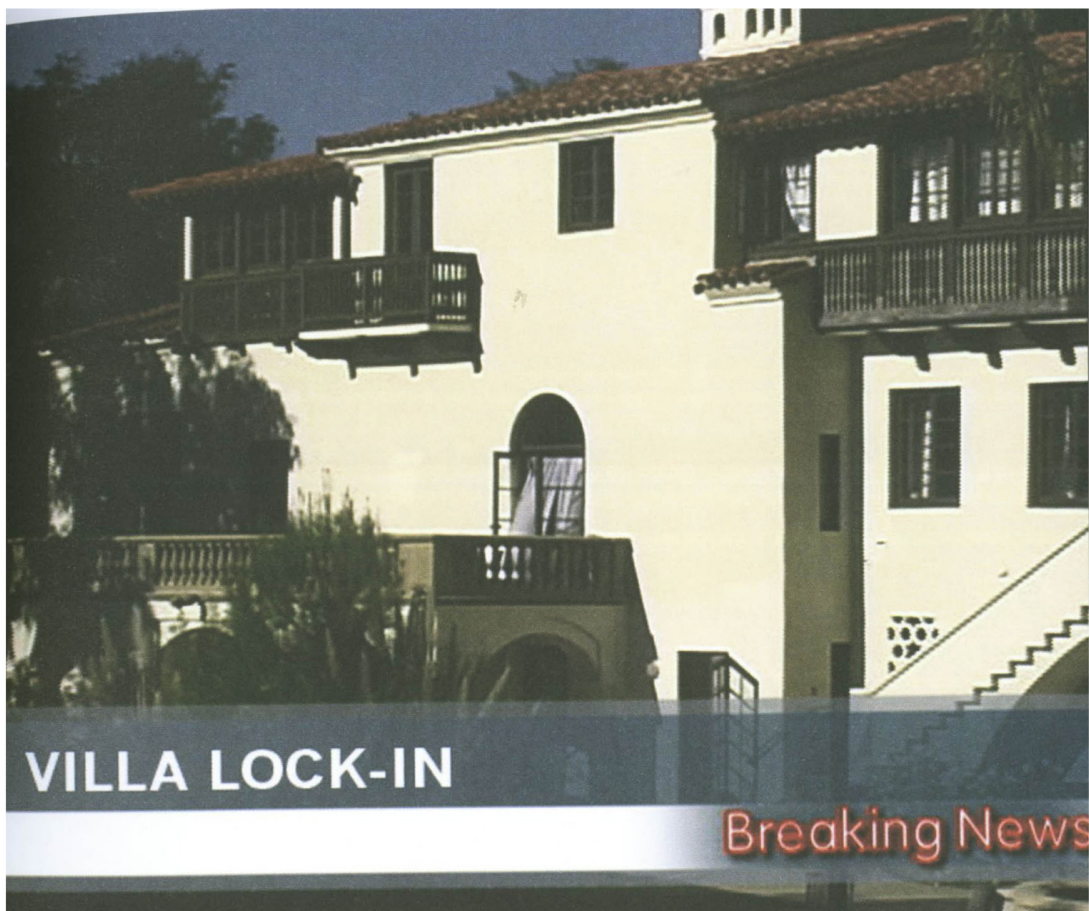
Max Andrews: There art world often rests on the understanding, a kind of tacit agreement, that its constituency and audience is a liberal one. It is taken for granted that “issues-based” exhibitions – around European identity, gender, for example – will represent a non-polemical, broadly non-conservative consensus. Aren't these rather cosy assumptions?

Natascha Sadr Haghighian: It's a depressing but important realisation that solidarity within the art world based on a common understanding or a common practice is actually non-existent. This is why I don't see the art world as a community but rather as a micro-environment that reflects political, economic and social structures on a macro level. I guess the assumption that the artist is liberal and progressive in respects to emancipatory issues results from the idealised outsider position that was successfully preserved after Romanticism. But actually art has become a very productive element of society not only economically but also in terms of producing cultural consensus. That's why it is constantly instrumentalised for various purposes and by different ideological powers. So even if you take “issues-based” exhibitions around identity or gender, they can come from anywhere within the bandwidth of ideological intention. I think that in order for the discussion about emancipatory issues to be forceful and effective, dissension has to be acknowledged and reinforced. Dissension not merely as an attitude or aesthetics but as a practice of taking sides as Avery Gordon calls it. This doesn't mean that one should stick a political slogan to every art work but rather consciously confront and question the contexts, conditions and effects of art production.



MA: Your film *Villa Watch* (with Judith Hopf) (2005) and others are in part concerned with exploring how events are witnessed and constructed differently depending on the position of the observer, here actually manifested through the use of different cameras. Is this a question of relativism or is it more specific to media representations?

NSH: The different cameras in the video signify different positions of observation as you said. The positions and their visual language arise from the observers' different roles in a societal framework. In *Villa Watch* the observers are: an artist who is in fact working on a film about light and shadow and ignorantly documents parts of the events; television, covering the villa lock-in live and 24/7 and local residents who see the neighbouring happening on TV and decide to record the events with their mini-dv camera. Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel* – which *Villa Watch* refers to – mainly focuses on the inside, i.e. representatives of bourgeois society that are stuck inside a villa after a dinner party for unknown reasons, and he takes apart the society's structures and modes of perception. *Villa Watch* instead focuses on the group of people waiting outside, who are also stuck because they cannot go inside (for unknown reason) but they apparently also cannot leave the situation. The video depicts their different perceptions of the situation and it questions the position of the observer in general. In this sense it also questions media representations as a manifestation of an observing society. Involvement and interaction seem abstract, the hierarchies defined, for example, by means of culture seem insurmountable. In the video we changed Buñuel's dinner party into a lecture and a reception afterwards. The question of here and there, inside and outside, exclusion and inclusion is defused by media representations but not resolved.



MA: You have often worked collaboratively. Is this a strategic, political or a practical consideration? The Thomas Hirschhorn quotation that he “doesn’t make political art, but makes art politically” seems interesting in this respect...

NSH: At the opening of the exhibition *No Matter How Bright the Light, the Crossing Occurs at Night* (KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin) my art dealer congratulated me: “finally you made a work on your own again. Very good!”. It was a funny remark as the exhibition was part of a two year collaborative project with Anselm Franke, Ines Schaber and Judith Hopf that resulted in a publication and an exhibition. But what was relevant to him was that the artwork I presented in the exhibition had only my name on it. Obviously no-one can work alone. Even let’s say a painter has suppliers, friends who give him critique, advice or inspiration, an audience, etc. All of these elements together produce an artwork. But in art unlike in film for example there is still the imagination of a very individual, singular entity that produces the work. I actually wonder why this belief is so resistant to the daily proof that art today is either produced collaboratively or corporately. I guess the answer can be found in my dealers remark. A collaborative artwork is really hard to sell. Interestingly a corporately produced work isn’t. Why? Because it doesn’t try to mess with the myth of the single artist. Corporate artists establish a hierarchy with the people they work with. On top of this hierarchy is officially the artist. So even though the resulting artwork is shaped by a group of people, the name of the product will remain the artist’s one. In my observation the artist has to be singular, unique individual in order to preserve the virtual value of art. An artwork is seen as priceless, i.e. abstractly expensive, and this is not only a market consensus but also

as a cultural one. That’s why it’s so perversely indisputable. It would probably seriously damage the art market if people would start admitting that they actually had collaborators. I guess that’s one reason why I enjoy officially working collaboratively and messing around with the preconceived structures. I never liked the artificial isolation nor working within hierarchies. Collaboration empowers and liberates my work both strategically and practically. The other reason of course is that it’s so much more fun, so much more challenging and so much more interesting.

MA: Can you tell me more about your work for *No Matter How Bright the Light, the Crossing Occurs at Night*? The notion was that the exhibition explored “the spectral”.

NSH: Two years ago we observed that peculiarly all of us had in some ways got involved in researching about the spectral. First we didn’t even know what to name it. Judith had just done a ghost movie, Ines and I had started reading Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1994) and Anselm wanted to do an exhibition about angels. We decided to investigate further into a possible common ground for these diverse interests. It seemed that the spectral was a useful synonym for an increasingly important state of being. An absence and a presence at the same time, a void in representational structures, a social death whilst still breathing. We finally described it as ghostly, as spectral. We came across a couple of texts by people like Avery Gordon, Thomas Keenan and Michael Taussig that became important coordinates for our discussion and also later partners for the publication. The thing we struggled most

with was the fact that the spectral seemed so much about exclusion and refusal or withdrawal of a status. Be it the status of a human being, a citizen, a member or more simply the status of being real. It seemed to be a powerless state. On the other hand it seemed to have some sort of superpowers that not only Marx used to invoke a revolutionary force. We wanted to deal with both of these aspects of the spectral that seemed less contradictory the more we looked at them. So it was a research also about detecting empowering strategies in the subtext of approved hegemonic structures. Most emancipatory movements fall into the trap of struggling for a slot in these structures to be granted the status of being real, to be addressable. They trade their superpowers for some sort of permit. Mostly they are corrupted in the process. Our aim was to discuss other types of struggle, maybe outside of the "real" world.

No Matter How Bright the Light, the Crossing Occurs at Night is a quote from a text by Thomas Keenan. A critical reflection about enlightenment. He calls for a new enlightenment one that doesn't just simply tries to drag everything into the spotlight but considers the shadow, the unknown, the unaddressable. We choose it as the title for our project because it was a guideline not only in what we wanted to present but also in how we questioned our own practice and knowledge production in general.

In my work for the exhibition I choose to work with Kathy Acker's book *Empire of the Senseless* (1988). In the book the Algerian War comes to Paris and Paris is completely destroyed.



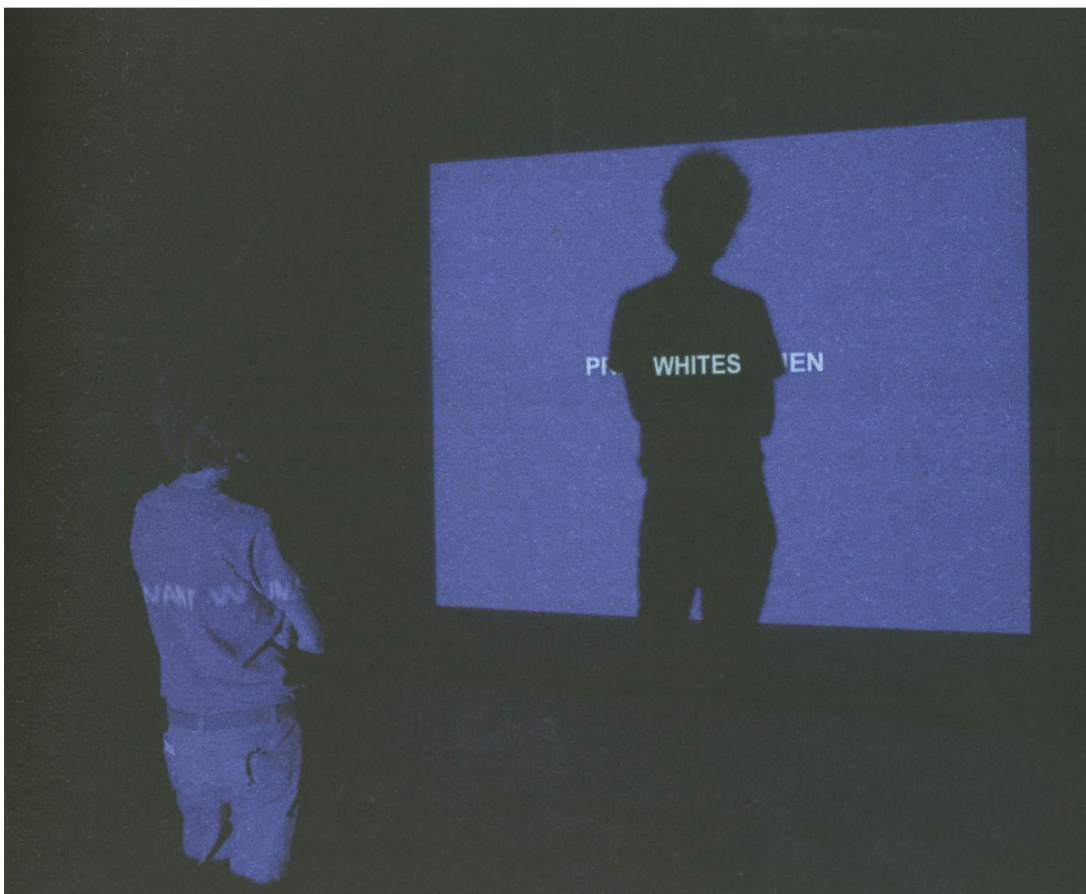
The City is taken over by the Arabs, by terrorists, by the scum of the earth. The concept of identity is dissolving in the rubble. People slip into a constant state of becoming still being haunted by their former lives as "human beings" but having left fixed categories of existence. I did an installation that consists of two parts. The first one includes a quote from the book, where one of the protagonists calls for the wiping out of all representational structures other than for pleasure. The text is written on the wall with phosphorescent paint. The room is equipped with motion detectors that trigger light when someone enters. The text is charged by the light but only becomes visible when people stop moving or leave. The second part of the installation consists of a double projection with two video projectors. I extracted all nouns from the book where people name each other or themselves. It's a list of a few thousand words. The list is projected onto the wall, each projector showing one word at a time. The words only become legible when people step into the projection and block one of the projections with their bodies. Their shadows become part of the projection with one of the words written onto it while the other word appears on their body. While my contribution for the publication is very much discussion based and deals with specific issues like the headscarf debate in Europe in conversation with Nanna Heidenreich or the prison industrial complex in the US in conversation with Ashley Hunt, I decided to contribute to exhibition with a more physical and experience-oriented work. I tried to create situations that allow to experience the spectral rather than talking about it.



I guess books and exhibitions have a different potential for me and in the struggle with knowledge production it seems useful for the moment to give them different jobs according to their specific features. But I'm not certain about this division of labour.

MA: The Bioswap project questions the relevance of an artist's biography in comprehending a work of art. What led you to this initiative?

NSH: The idea for exchanging artist's biographies which Bioswap is based on originated from my multiple attempts to play with the conventional formats of art catalogues. If you want to study the mechanisms of representation, catalogues are a good thing to start with. Actually there is almost nothing about an art catalogue that I don't find funny. More than anything else it shows that there is a great doubt about the value and necessity of art in general but also about every single artwork. So its foremost purpose seems to be validation and valuation. First it usually starts with a text by a specialist who is appointed by the art world to validate meaning and quality. Then it continues with presenting the artwork mostly in an iconic, fetishist, absolute fashion in order to make it impassible. Lastly it ends with the artist's biography which localises the imagery that one just saw in places of appointed significance. It proves the artist's acknowledgement by the art world and helps evaluating his or her importance and relevance. In my eyes this format is the result of sheer paranoia and lack of confidence. But more importantly it is mostly just not interesting.



One way of addressing this problem was to alter my biography. In my catalogue contributions so far I have used all sorts of data, from a list of all my injuries to a list of where I earned money during my time as working as an artist. Lately I had fun with borrowing biographies from friends. You read the bio and in the last sentence it says: "this bio was borrowed from so and so". Hopefully it confuses the legibility and purpose of this particular chapter of representation. So starting the website bioswop.net first of all had practical motivations. As it is tiresome and time consuming to come up with new bios all the time I wanted to have a place where I could just go and click on something. But secondly I thought that it might be an interesting practice to share with more people. Maybe it would become a new movement. People exchanging, borrowing bios just like anything else that you get tired of. I would love to see a catalogue with every artist having the same bio or having swapped them amongst each other. Unfortunately some artists are scared to do that.

MA: Lastly, to borrow a question from Kirstine Roepstorff, "Who decides who decides?"

NSH: I like this question because it makes things complicated. And I think they are indeed.

