

A gallery closed in spring

On Maria Eichhorn's
5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours

– Stewart Martin

The framework for this text has been written already. It would be redundant to reproduce it but for the fact that we are invited to experience, to respond to, even to enjoy the redundancy it enables.

The exhibition will begin with a one-day symposium on Saturday 23 April, addressing ideas raised by the project. At Eichhorn's request, the gallery's staff will then withdraw their labour for the remaining five weeks of the exhibition. None of Chisenhale's employees will work during this period and the gallery and office will be closed, implementing leisure and 'free time' in the place of work.¹

Further details could be added, but they would remain incidental to the simplicity of the form, both abstract and insistent. It is not ornate or mysterious, interesting or absorbing. It is clear and austere. If one looks at it directly, one finds oneself transfixed and lost within its unresponsiveness. But it also enables one to look away and to occupy oneself with whatever else lies in its precincts. It is a stage that promises not to distract from the activities it stages. But keeping this promise is left to the actors.

The framework is a setting rather than a script, allowing the actors to write their own or improvise, but it includes a sequence of acts and an allocation of roles or masks, which will inflect whatever is said. Without knowing anything about what the actors will say until they say it, we already know the role they will be playing when they speak, the mask they will be wearing. The main roles are: 'the staff', 'the artist', 'the intellectuals' and 'the public'.

Act 1

The first act is set in a gallery. But this is only the central location for a range of peripheral sites – offices, studies, studios, libraries, other galleries. In fact, these sites cascade into the distance, both spatially and temporally, and appear in the gallery as if in a slideshow.

'The artist' plays the leading role in this act, but less through the quantity of her lines than how they outline the other roles and the acts in which they will be given a part. Her performance is that of a playwright, muted but authoritative. 'The staff' and 'the intellectuals' are invited to play their roles more or less as they would in any case, and a large part of the act is given over to what they do. Whatever the vagaries of these roles and how they interact, what is clear is that 'the public' is left waiting in the wings. Occasionally they are addressed from the stage, at first almost inaudibly and then with the loud blast of the artwork's public announcement, followed by its echoes. The resonance of their responses builds throughout the first act, but the grand entrance of 'the public' onto the stage is yet to come.

1 From the introduction to Maria Eichhorn, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, Chisenhale Gallery, 23 April – 29 May 2016: <http://chisenhale.org.uk>

The act is dominated by preparations. This work is the general setting: the place of work. There are scenes of meetings, of discussions and proposals, of decisions requested and reached, scenes of phone calls, emails and texts being written and rewritten.

This act is very, very long. Meetings go on for hours, decisions take days to reach, texts take weeks to write. Run sequentially, all the scenes would last far longer than 5 weeks, 25 days or 175 hours. It contains some fascinating moments, but, as a whole, it is far too boring to entertain an audience.

The whole act is set in the dark. The scenes are difficult to make out, obscure to all but those directly involved in them. Edited highlights will be replayed in the bright light of the second act. The transcription of the discussion with ‘the staff’ will be the primary exhibit. But this will only offer a glimpse into the dark recesses of the first act. The discussion itself, as a scene from this act, is reduced to what appears in the light of its published transcription. The scene in which the transcription itself is prepared will be, likewise, reduced to the moments fixing its public appearance, disappearing within this appearance. The same will be true of the texts by ‘the intellectuals’, their public appearance casting their preparation into darkness. The darkest scenes turn out to be those overcast by the light thrown over them.

The illumination of this dark world of preparations proves to be surprisingly deceptive. But it invites us into a realm that we know surprisingly well. The experience of all the work that disappears from view in the result, or results in nothing, is tediously familiar. Who hasn’t already seen the scene in which ‘the intellectual’ stares at the computer screen for hours, rewriting and deleting the same bloody sentence, again and again, before deciding to leave it out altogether or, worse, stick with the original. We only have to close our eyes in order to see the afterimages of what will appear, the negative scenes in which another artist or artwork or intellectual was proposed.

Then there are the obscene scenes that our desire and fear project wildly into the darkness.

Act 2

The second act is set in an empty gallery. A symposium is taking place. The brilliant lights of publicity have been turned on – albeit filtered by the entrance fee.

‘The intellectuals’ have been given the leading role in this scene. They have been enlisted by ‘the artist’ and will appear as her agents. If they turn against her they will appear traitorous. ‘The artist’ will appear herself an agent of her artwork, an orchestrating role regardless of how little she says. The role of ‘the intellectuals’ is further determined by their position between ‘the artist’ or, more importantly, her artwork, and the other roles

of 'the staff' and 'the public'. The freedom expected of 'the intellectuals' will be constrained therefore by this role of mediation, by the constraints on them from taking over the other roles.

This scene is oriented towards an event, the unwritten drama or dialectic between the roles, and this event might even be seen as the horizon intended by the artwork, the content it intends to frame. But the scene will also be oriented by a set of already written scripts, primarily the texts by 'the intellectuals' and the transcript of the discussion between 'the artist' and 'the staff'. These scripts anticipate the event, but they do not realize it, since the real drama is not a reproduction of what already exists; not an imitation, but an interaction, a political activity, which only exists between actors. The reading of these texts by 'the intellectuals' or 'the staff' will only delay or pause the interaction. The planned symposium, with its allocation of roles, is an impoverished form for this activity, but does not exclude it. The scripted play is its image, relieving the contemplator from interacting.

While the discussion with 'the staff' can offer an image of interaction, however tentative, the monologues of 'the intellectuals' cannot. Both kinds of text can offer an image for contemplation while also offering a product, a tool, which can be taken up, tried out or put to work, or which can be disregarded. These functions determine how the work of the texts relates to the work of art and its own functions. Insofar as the artwork promises to be a framework, the texts can stand within it, contentedly or not. They can accept its form and take on the role of its content. Or they can try to refuse it, claiming a form unto themselves, or even a form that would contain the artwork.

The austerity of the work of 'the artist' displays a capacious generosity to the work of 'the intellectuals' and 'the staff'. It withdraws into the background, allowing them to say what they want, more or less. But it remains the background of whatever they say. A text seeking to confront the artwork is mocked by its indifference and shamed by its generosity. This is compounded by the obligation to the other roles, to offer works that will enable interaction, not disable it. Insofar as this interaction is the content that is ultimately intended by the form of the artwork, a text's discontent with its framing will appear selfish unless it dedicates itself anew to this content. This demands that the text does not distract interaction in the contemplation of its internal drama, or foreclose interaction in an act to which there can be no response, or displace interaction by demanding further labour or works.

The austere work activates its users, its contemplators or the interaction besides it, by closing itself off from these activities, liberating their independence through the independence of the work. It does not attempt to absorb them into the work itself. It even releases contemplation to be self-absorbed. The ideal work would have no effect whatsoever, except for the fact that such a work would activate nothing. Even the plain effect of its

indifference must engage those whom it would disengage. The rich work is effective and engaging. It offers itself to users, contemplators and actors as a realm in which their activities take on a displaced form. But this activation is a displacement nonetheless, absorbed into the inactivity of the always already completed work. The ideal of the incompletable work would be endlessly absorbing. For the rich work to be really activating, it must possess its own qualities of disengagement, of austerity. This is how these works can work together.

Act 3

The third act is set outside a closed gallery. The setting is split: on one side is the free time and leisure of ‘the staff’, on the other, the closed gallery itself.

‘The artist’ and ‘the intellectuals’ have been given nothing to say in this act. It is not that they have no lines, but that their lines have been already written, in the texts and recordings from the symposium, which now speak for them automatically.

‘The staff’ play the leading role now, even though they too have nothing to say. They too have automated their speech in the discussion text, which will work continuously for them, without them having to lift a finger. But this text says only what they did before the exhibition started, not what they will do during the exhibition. The discussion text offers an exceptional exhibition of the role of ‘the staff’ before the start of the exhibition, but says almost nothing about what they will do in their free time. We see only what they did and what they will not be doing. An inhibition is exhibited.

Exhibited are activities that are normally inhibited, hidden from view: the preparation, the facilitation, the maintenance, all the work that reveals the exhibition and conceals itself therein in order not to obscure the view. Here, abnormally, the artwork inhibits an exhibit that would inhibit these activities, instead exhibiting them as its subject matter. This is what the discussion text exhibits. But this exhibit still stands under the sign of its inhibition. Exhibited is what will not take place. The artwork does not make an exhibit out of all this inhibited work by, for instance, opening the offices to view or displaying the renovation of the building. In fact, the artwork subjugates these activities to a more literal inhibition: their suspension. They are suspended in an exhibit that pictures an ideal work, one that would work without the need to continuously work for it. This is a norm of the work of art, which this artwork’s abnormality radicalises.

But the leading role of ‘the staff’ in this third act is not their role in the first act and before. It is what they will now do, now that they do not need to work for the gallery. We have no idea what this will be and we are not promised that we will see it. ‘The staff’ has not been asked to account for themselves at the end of the day with an exhibit of their free time activities and its outcomes. The artwork does not only show us the hidden realm of working for exhibition, but invites us to see an unseen realm of free time

activities. These activities, rather than the jobs of ‘the staff’ or the closed gallery itself, constitute the hidden chamber into which the desire of ‘the public’ is invited by veiling it from view. These activities are included in the artwork’s plan, but not planned. The artwork exhausts itself in securing the conditions for their release on full pay. This is its self-sufficiency, its enclosure and openness, its jealousy and generosity. The only limit to its generosity is its generosity itself. The artwork does not seek to appropriate the fruits of the staff’s freedom. They are given their freedom without conditions, save the condition that it is given, not instituted in a free act.

‘The public’ now floods the scene, but most of what they say will not be recorded. Out of the flood, however, bobs a vociferous new role, ‘the critics’, who will attempt to inflect the light of publicity and mediate between ‘the public’ and the artwork. ‘The critics’ have two masks readily at hand for this job, ‘the agent’ and ‘the provocateur’. Through one or other, or both at the same time, the hushed voice of ‘the public’ will be spoken over.

The closed gallery itself stands in the background to all this, somewhat serenely. It is shut, but it shuts no one out – except perhaps the poor soul who has misunderstood the exhibition listings. Those who would make a visit in any case risk idolatry. Vandals risk iconoclasm.

The closed gallery will take on an ambivalent existence. It will exist actually and insistently as a gallery that is not open, not exhibiting, not working. It is not only an idea or a lie without basis in fact. The closed gallery may appear as a redundant building or a shut door, but even if these prove to be appearances – even if the building still can be accessed, still houses some activity – ‘the staff’ will not be staffing it. This is its ultimate closure, not the closed door itself. For the staff to continue working would constitute the lie. The gallery will be closed essentially to ‘the staff’.

In another sense, the closed gallery will exist as a peculiarly insistent representation – that of the framework text. While not the closed gallery itself, and not sufficient to represent all that this closure will bring into existence, this representation is clear enough to convey the sense that one grasps what it represents, that nothing would be gained by going to see for oneself.

The framework text is matter-of-fact, literal. It is not imaginative, even though it remains an image. Moreover, the matter-of-factness of the text imitates the matter-of-factness of the thing itself, the operations organising the symposium, closing the gallery, releasing the staff from working, etc. And these operations are not images. Therefore, the residual images invoked here are rendered transparent and bound to a reality that would displace them.

However, these operations and their reality will be remote for anyone not directly involved. They will be seen from a distance, as both out of reach and yet in focus. We may not be able to see the operations closing

the gallery, but we can form an image of them. The more invisible these operations, the less there is to see by going to visit the closed gallery, the more complete this image is from the reality that would displace it.

The image of the closed gallery is possessed by an extraordinary power. It is certainly powerful enough to overwhelm the distinctive features of the representation from which it derives. The rigorously crafted operations are essential to distinguishing the artwork from familiar works – above all other gallery closures by ‘the artist’ herself or by other artists in the past – thereby marking its originality, both its modernity and its tradition. But this distinction is faced with making its mark in a far greater scene than these familiars. It faces the inspiration of a profound imagination, which recognises in the closed gallery an image of its most compelling urges: the desire to see what has been banned, and the desire to be liberated from this compulsion; the desire for wealth without work; the desire to do something else or to do nothing at all... The image of the locked cabinet; the veil more fascinating than what it veils; paradise; the adventure or the holiday, or the holiday without end...

The image of the closed gallery can be easily grasped, not because it is clearly represented, but because it is already understood by a vivid and profound intuition, infusing the image with a significance exceeding its signification. This intuition is not itself an image, but an imaginative capacity, which recognises an image as its reflection and production. The capacity of an image to inspire this imagination lies not within the specific features of the image itself, but in how these features enable the imaginative capacity to invest itself in them. The greater this investment is in a specific image, the more this image appears to contain imagination. But this is a deception, demonstrated by the profligacy with which imagination transfers its investments.

The artwork abstracts from this imaginative world, its plethora of urges and images. It does not represent them, feed them or absorb them; neither does it distract them. Rather, it excludes them. But, in being excluded, they are also left to themselves and their own devices. Abstraction becomes the mirror of whatever they want. This is the artwork’s asceticism and hedonism. This imagination would only be disciplined if it were absorbed by the abstraction itself – as if it saw itself in the mirror itself rather than what it reflects. This would transfix it.

The ambivalent existence of the closed gallery will obtain a further and decisive twist by the extent to which it will still function, still work. The gallery’s electronic spaces will remain open. And there will be much to see: the framework text, the texts by ‘the intellectuals’, the discussion with ‘the staff’, an interview with ‘the artist’, the recordings from the symposium; and all opening onto the network of other exhibits from the gallery’s past work, especially its *How to work together* project, which this exhibition completes rather than arrests.

The objective character of these texts, the extent to which they stand out from the work that prepared and produced them, will now come into effect and do the work that their reification enables. Their disdain for the work preparing them, even when it took the form of flattering this preparation, will now liberate the need to carry on working. But it is not just the closed gallery's objectivity that enables them to stand out: it is their automation. The gallery is not so much closed as automated. The 'out of office' replies informing you that your calls will not be returned, that your emails will be deleted, inform you above all that the machine is working, so take the day off. This closed gallery is an automated factory in which no one needs to work.

The publicity still works. Indeed, the publicity is liberated from the mundane world of its address and inhabitants. 'The public' are not actually barred from entering the gallery, since there is nothing to see there in any case. They are enabled to visit all there is to see, whenever they wish. And the artwork gives itself to them in a mental image that they can take away and enjoy at their leisure.

The degree to which the gallery is conserved through its closure will come as a disappointment to those seeking to tear down the system, or at least the thrill of it. We are not invited to the gallery's self-destruction. Neither are we invited to its occupation by autonomous workers. And their absence is not the result of a strike. All these actions are invoked and revoked by the conservative dimension of the artwork.

But this revocation does not only refuse these actions; it also recalls how they are already active in the conservation of the artwork. The closed gallery reproduces a classical function of the work of art: to produce a work that endures beyond the labour that produced it, liberating those contemplating it from the burden of its production. The appropriation of this contemplation by a ruling class transformed its pleasures into the spoils of war. But the struggle to emancipate labour into an activity of aesthetic delight is burdened by the extent to which it already accepts defeat and settles for a peace in which all are condemned to an aestheticised labour. Winning the peace demands re-appropriating the enduring works too, and, with them, the activities and idle pleasures they enable.

The closed gallery conjures up one of the most powerful myths of this struggle against the leisure class: the self-annihilation of the work of art; the self-dissolution of its most prized commodity. This is a spellbinding riddle: that the work of art would annihilate itself without making its self-annihilation into a work of art; that the work of art would be liberated from commodification without commodifying this liberation. The riddle has become overfamiliar without being solved, thereby completing its spell. Breaking the spell would require a society that does not reproduce itself through commodification; a society in which the work of art does not need to sacrifice itself in order to prevent its appropriation.

This closed gallery returns to the riddle, exhibiting the commodification of its liberation in the wage labour that produces its propertylessness, and in the wage labour it then releases. Its exhibition of wages is a riposte to the unwaged labour saturating the artworld and the world outside, a plea for this labour to be valued. But it is also an altogether more radical plea for the value of not labouring and the waging of producing nothing. Labour is liberated from wage labour: and yet the spell of the wage remains binding. Free time remains reserved as a prize for wage labourers, and the wage remains compensation for their expropriation from common wealth. The gallery is not turned into an autonomous workplace, but an automated one. The gallery is not made into common property but common expropriation. The gallery is closed to 'the staff' in order to give them a break from the fact that it is always closed to them.

A work of art cannot institute the common wealth that promises to break this spell. The more it tries, the more its inability shows through, and the more cruel the distortion of its best intentions. But a work of art that does not even try is worthless from the start. And so too is the response that knows only these inabilities. Common wealth is a common work.

Curtain

The first act is nearly over. The endless labour of preparation is about to vanish into the visibility of its end, the enduring work that will take the place of its preparation and clear a place for acts two and three: its interaction with other works, or the interaction of actors besides these works, or the contemplation of this scene in whole or part, or the abandonment of it altogether. Its use in further labour is not planned, but cannot be ruled out. In any case, the horizon of potentiality opened by the labour of preparation is just about to be closed, opening a new horizon of actuality. The fictions of anticipation are about to be exposed to the truths of fulfilment.