

# Olivia Plender

## HISTORICAL FACTS ARE AS MYTHIC AS LITERARY CONSTRUCTS<sup>1</sup>

*Essay on the relationships between art, pedagogy, history  
and the dissemination of knowledge in Olivia Plender's work*

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EDUCATION is the main subject of the tenth chapter of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* – the last, yet unfinished work by French nineteenth century writer Gustave Flaubert – whose narrative structure has informed the organisation of content in this present issue of *A Prior*. The theme of education could be seen as the main conceptual framework for the whole novel, which tells the story – or the “odyssey”, in the words of French poet and novelist Raymond Queneau – of two Frenchmen who leave behind their unsatisfying Parisian lives to move to the countryside and lead a life dedicated to the pleasures of cultivating their minds. In this tragicomical tale depicting essential aspects of nineteenth century French society, we come to be aware of the relationships between education, culture, politics, concepts of knowledge and the dynamics of social interaction, all of which are crucial to Olivia Plender’s overarching work.

In this context, one of the challenges of this essay is to embrace the remarkable ability of Plender’s work to construct rich and complex narratives that reveal the inherent relationships between education, art, economy or politics, among other key issues. This text will focus on a number of works that have developed a defined research interest, more specifically the question of education and pedagogy, and the

role and status of art in that context, notably in relation to the history of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and its arts programming in the 1950s and 1960s. Through the lens of works including: the performances and video installations *Ken Russell in conversation with Olivia Plender* (2005–2007) and *Monitor* (2006–2007); the exhibition *Information, Education, Entertainment* (Marabou Park, Stockholm, 2007); and the installations *Slowly Learning to Survive the Desire to Simplify* (Iaspis, Stockholm, 2006) and *Newsroom* (Hessel Museum, Bard College, NY, 2008), I will try to unpack the numerous questions that Plender puts forward and that appear to map a set of political ideas she is concerned with. This text will further examine the formal and aesthetic strategies she uses to disseminate her ideas both in the context of her exhibitions, and beyond the gallery walls, through her performative interventions and engagement with comic books and popular print.

### THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF PLENDER’S INVESTIGATION

In the interview with critic and curator Kim Einarsson, published on the occasion of her solo exhibition *Information, Education, Entertainment* at Marabou Park – whose title borrows from the



Olivia Plender, 'Monitor', Performance, Tate Triennial, Tate Britain 2006

Photo: Christian McDonald

BBC's original mission statement – Plender points out two main elements to account for her interest in the BBC as a public institution. In Plender's view, looking at BBC programming from the 1960s onwards highlights "changes in attitudes to the place of the arts within society".<sup>2</sup> The artist is further interested in the way the type of discourse disseminated through the BBC programmes reveals "how history is told",<sup>3</sup> or in other words, sheds light on "the ideological framework around the narration of history".<sup>4</sup> BBC programming in the 1960s and more particularly its arts programme *Monitor* (which ran from 1958 to 1964) in that sense carries grounds for both sharp critic and inspiration. Through the choice of her field of investigation, Plender clearly rejects one directional reading of history, and instead opens up the possibility for a diversity of ideological positions to cohabit in the production of her discourse. We soon become aware that the works she creates out of her research are far from basic accounts of an investigation, but instead complex constructions of an artistic world that puts in motion factual and historical information in the context of the production of new narratives.

With the performances and video works *Monitor* and *Ken Russell in conversation with*

*Olivia Plender*, which were both presented in *Information, Education, Entertainment*, Plender does not directly question television as a potential medium for art itself, but rather investigates another set of questions. One is about how, in the context of public services, television – as a media able to communicate to the people as a mass – has been used in the service of education, according to a democratic principle inherited from the nineteenth century, in the same way that school was made free and compulsory for all children up to the age of fifteen or sixteen. Within this particular question, Plender already touches upon a subject that constitutes a red thread throughout many of her works, confronting the idea that although access to knowledge is essential to provide people with the means for independent thinking and political agency ("knowledge is power"<sup>5</sup>), it is also crucial to question what constitutes "knowledge" and who has the authority to produce such knowledge within society. In short, the democratic potential of a massive dissemination of knowledge cannot be discussed outside of a given ideological framework.

This is why the figure of Ken Russell – which she explored in a live conversation with the British filmmaker in a 1960s-styled TV set in-



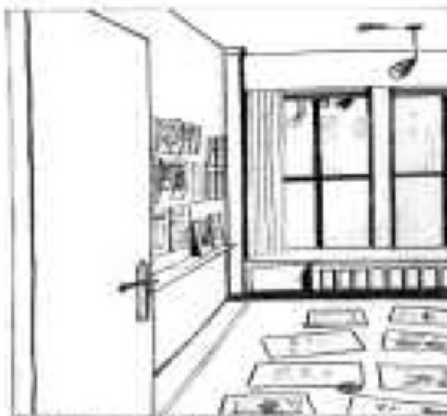
Olivia Plender, 'Monitor', Performance, Tate Triennial, Tate Britain 2006

Photo: Christian McDonald

stalled in a village barn in the Lake District in 2005 – is of special interest to Plender's investigation. Through Plender's interview, and through examples from the films and biopics that Russell directed under the umbrella of *Monitor*, we become aware of a unique empirical situation by which Russell's films, although made to serve an educational or informational purpose in the context of the BBC, gradually transgressed a certain conception of documentary filmmaking and how history should be told. Russell's films on composers – including *Elgar* (1962), *Delius: Song of Summer* (1968) or *Mahler* (1974) – all three discussed in the conversation, appear to bring semi-fictionalised elements and blur the boundary between biographical facts and fantasy. Yet in Plender's questioning we slowly understand that although Russell may have represented an inspirational voice of dissensus within the context of more traditional discourses from that period, he might also be seen as someone who perpetuated a certain romantic idea of the artist as a visionary or genius. This very conception of the artist as genius lies at the centre of Plender's critical discourse as it has initially manifested in the series of comics titled *The Masterpiece* (2001–2006), as well as later in *Monitor*.

The works mentioned in the introduction – as well as *The Masterpiece* whose narrative is set in the backdrop of a fictionalised 1960s London art scene – set up a context from which we can draw a map of political concerns and positions that are key to Plender's artistic practice. Plender's critical investigation, which she relevantly describes as a work in progress that punctually becomes manifest through her works and exhibitions, continuously goes back to the ideological foundations of contemporary society, and particularly to the Enlightenment as a key moment in the ideology of modernity. Democracy, education and social advancement all appear to be ideological products of that period, and despite the changes that society has been through in the last decades, these principles are still very much foundational to our public institutions. It is less these principles as such that many thinkers (on the questions of feminism, post-colonialism or gender studies particularly), political activists and art practitioners like Plender question, but rather the ideological framework within which these ideas are set, and how these ideas have been able to adapt to the changes that society has been going through. The questions of what constitutes knowledge, who has the authority to determine what knowl-





OVER THE FOLLOWING WEEKS, NICK STAYED IN HIS STUDIO. HE SAW NO-ONE AS THERE WAS NO-ONE IN THIS CITY FOR HIM TO SEE. THEN ONE DAY TO NICK'S SURPRISE, THERE WAS A RING ON HIS DOORBELL.



HE LOOKED OUT OF THE WINDOW & SAW A LARGE CAR PARKED OUTSIDE THE BUILDING.



"I  
THOUGHT  
YOU MIGHT  
LIKE TO  
COME &  
MEET SOME  
FRIENDS  
OF MINE."



CLIMB IN



THEY DROVE TO SEASIDE, WHERE SHE STOPPED THE CAR & LED HIM INTO A STRIP CLUB.



WHILE HE RAST THE STAGE DELIA TOOK NICK STRAIGHT INTO THE BACKROOM. HE RECOGNIZED A FISH PLANT FROM THE PARTY.



"SO DELIA,  
WHO'S YOUR  
NEW FRIEND?"



ANSWERING THE QUESTION DELIA REVEALED A BOTTLE OF VODKA & LED HIM TO A TABLE IN THE CORNER.



"THIS IS NORMAN & NANCY.  
NORMAN RUNS A BARBERSHOP IN TOWN.  
I'VE TOLD HIM ALL ABOUT YOU."



NICK FELT UNCOMFORTABLE, WORRIED THAT HE WAS A COUNTRY BUMPER. HE BEGAN TO PICK UP AFTER THEY'D OPENED THE BOTTLE OF VODKA & STARTED TO TALK THEM ABOUT HIS PLANS TO LEAVE THE WESTERN SIDE.



HE TOLD THEM HOW HE'D BEEN PLAYING THE MASTERPIECE SINCE HE WAS A BOY GROWING UP ON THE WESTERN SIDE.

edge is and isn't, and of who has the ability to tell history, have a fundamental role to play in shaping the future of society and in defining the type of democracy we live – and will live – in.

As an alternative to the didactic positions of the schoolmaster, the academic, the historian or their institutional counterparts (school, university, museum, television, etc.), Plender suggests the figure of the amateur or the autodidact. This figure that Plender cherishes produces subjectivity and radical thinking in contrast with the conservative structure of authority. Plender's emancipated figure, who varies from project to project, could in that sense parallel philosopher Jacques Rancière's idea of the "ignorant master", which foregrounds the possibility of an alternative to school's "phantasmagorical power to realise social equality".<sup>6</sup> He opposes the "pedagogical reason that lifts the veil on the obscurity of things"<sup>7</sup> and whose topography is vertical – high versus low, surface versus depth – with the horizontal topography of other types of learning, for example autodidacticism. He argues that our democracies are founded on a consensus, on inequality as an empirical fact and on the ideal of equality as society's collective aim, which constitute the conceptual grounds for what he calls the "pedagogical reason". To pedagogy, Rancière opposes the "virtue of ignorance", as in ignoring the knowledge of inequality. It is by ignoring inequality that we establish equality as a fundament, and that we offer the possibility for individuals and collectives alike to invent new forms of actions to test this foundational idea of equality against reality.

### PLENDER'S POETICS OF HISTORY

In both Rancière and Plender's modes of thought, the role of language and narration appear to be central. The production of subjectivity that is necessary to enable people to negotiate and interpret contemporary society, and thus gain political agency, is intimately linked to a relationship to discourse. Rancière uses the term of the poetics of knowledge, putting for-

ward the idea of a discourse deprived of a position of legitimacy, a discourse that gives itself its own poetic, narrative quality and relationship between speech and choice of words. In Plender's works, the constant re-invention of her own discourse goes through many different forms and strategies that nevertheless have in common narration and role-playing.

Many aspects of Plender's artistic practice can be looked at from the perspective of performance or the performative. It might be worth highlighting here that performance is a loose term that refers to how some of Plender's works had a first manifestation through a live event. Another important element is that the staging of these events had been formally thought through. However, the format of these performances or events very much vary according to context and Plender has used the forms of the live interview in *Ken Russell in conversation with Olivia Plender*; the combination of live music, slideshow and voice-over in *Monitor*; the board game, the historical guided tour and interventions in the street in other of her works. What the space of performance allows that other formats do not do with the same intensity is social interaction and the ability for the artist to capture an immediate reaction from the audience, or even from the protagonists of the piece itself in the case of Ken Russell. The performances in that sense appear as a continuation of the investigation through other means, a moment in which the information accumulated by Plender through her research is activated and appropriated by the artist to construct her own narrative and open it up for the viewer/spectator's interpretation. The particular features of Plender's performances are their embracing of the theatricality of history through the idea of role-playing. Her detailed attention to the aesthetic aspects of the narration of history – through décor, costumes, tone of language or music for example – play a huge part in immersing herself and the audience in her fictionalised discourses. It is not simply about narration but about space and a sense of existing in that particular place for the



Olivia Plender, 'Newroom', Installation view, 2008,  
Hessel Museum of Art, New York Photo: Chris Kendall

time of the event. In his text on Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström, an artist Plender often refers to as a source of inspiration, Mike Kelley suggests that “historical facts are as mythic as literary constructs, art, on the psychic level, is just as ‘real’ as this wordly data”.<sup>8</sup> The sense of “reality” in Plender’s performances is strong because her performances sit on the edge of two worlds, the imaginary and the everyday, creating spaces of social interaction that challenge traditional divisions between the field of art and the field of politics, between visual language and political discourse.

In her performances and installations for exhibitions, Plender has often focused on the space in which discourse is produced. Here we again touch upon the question of staging and how Plender uses décor, props, costumes and music as key protagonists in her works. Space is not a mere backdrop; it often appears as a crucial element in the production of discourse, on one hand, and in creating a space for the viewer’s reception of information, on the other. In the context of the particular body of works that I have been looking at in this essay, we can see how Plender’s exploration of the space of the television studio has provided different perspectives on its relationship with both produc-

tion and reception of information and knowledge. The question of the production of discourse in television is the subject of the performance *Monitor* staged during the Tate Triennial 2006 at Tate Britain. Plender combined elements referring to the original TV programme – *Monitor*’s logo was shown on a large billboard panel; she staged a live jazz band playing the soundtrack of the programme, thus reproducing what happened in the TV studio; and used as a script for the performance the transcript of one of *Monitor*’s programmes – with photographs of the places described by the protagonists and the narrator, taken by Plender in 2006 [visual elements including images of artworks, architecture and artefacts borrowed from the picture library of Tate]. Through this template, Plender restaged a type of experience that contemporary audiences are no longer familiar with, although the context of the performance – a museum setting – might have implicitly mirrored a similar type of didactic discourse. In the later exhibition at Marabou Park, Plender set up a large installation that also recalled the context of television studios in the 1960s within which she displayed the video version of *Monitor* as well as the video recording of her interview with Ken Russell. The set in which the visitor evolved





Olivia Plender, 'Newroom', Installation view, 2008,  
Hessel Museum of Art, New York Photo: Chris Kendall

was a space where historical re-enactment, performed through the use of furniture arrangement and historical images, met fictional narrative through the use of cut out comics imagery representing figures and objects blown up to human scale, recalling Plender's previous use of comics imagery in her comics series *The Masterpiece*.

This use of comics imagery can also be found in the installations *Slowly Learning to Survive the Desire to Simplify* (Iaspis, 2006) and *Newsroom* (Hessel Museum, 2008), both commissions for spaces in which to host discursive events. In these installations, Plender pushed the function of her installations as structures within which discourse can be produced, bearing in mind the potential for these structures to shape this very process of production in these contexts. Plender's attempt to use design and architecture to that end is particularly evident in *Newsroom*, for which she imagined a space where the speakers would sit in the centre of the installation, on the same level as the audience, rather than above them in a traditional stage situation. In these situations, Plender confronts the viewer with a multiplicity of perspectives, processes of production and levels of discourses, using a language that always tries to include the audience

rather than position them outside of the work. In the manner of Öyvind Fahlström, Plender's work seems to "acknowledge the fact that the viewer tries to "read" a collection of images and to make sense of them, and does this using a common visual language, a socialized language".<sup>9</sup>

#### Notes

1. Mike Kelley, *Mythic Science*, essay on Öyvind Fahlström, 1995 ([http://www.fahlstrom.com/texts\\_mike.asp?id=7&subid=10](http://www.fahlstrom.com/texts_mike.asp?id=7&subid=10))
2. Interview with Kim Einarsson, for the exhibition *Information, Education, Entertainment* at Marabou Park Annex 12 October–2 December 2007
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Jacques Rancière, "Sur *Le maitre ignorant*", article published in *Multitudes* <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Sur-Le-maitre-ignorant>
7. Ibid.
8. Mike Kelley, *Mythic Science*, essay on Öyvind Fahlström, 1995 ([http://www.fahlstrom.com/texts\\_mike.asp?id=7&subid=10](http://www.fahlstrom.com/texts_mike.asp?id=7&subid=10))
9. Ibid.