

Johanna Billing: Keep on Doing
Conversation with Judith Winter, Depute Director/Arts, DCA

Judith Winter: I read an account somewhere of why you started making art. You said that you "chose art as a way of not deciding". Can you say more about that early decision to become an artist?

Johanna Billing: I was always interested in art when I was younger, and I made sculpture at home, but I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I wasn't surrounded by art and there weren't artists around me in the town where I grew up, so I couldn't really identify with being an artist, and I still probably have that feeling. At school was interested in so many things; I wanted to become a journalist, I was very interested in history, and I was already working at arranging concerts in my home town. What I like about art is that it's one of the few disciplines that is a mix of everything – it goes over all borders. So it started as a way of working across all these fields. Then later on, as I developed my work, people started wondering, "what's the difference? Isn't this like a short film?", or "this could be a music video, or this is just a concert?" I try to keep on finding this in-between way of working through combining different things.

Can you say more about the people who are in your films?

I have never worked with actors. It's always people who just have some connection to what the work is about, or the starting point for the work. They are not my friends, but sometimes it can look like they are. I try to involve people around me and reflect what I am experiencing. I am not aiming to make a portrait of a younger generation, although sometimes that's what people derive. I guess the older I am, the older the people in the films will be.

I was watching the films with the rest of the DCA team, prior to install, in a non-gallery context. We wondered if you could say something about why you need your films to be experienced in a gallery, rather than viewed on TV or in a cinema?

I think that's a very important question because film is one of my biggest interests. I love the cinema, and I love those kind of spaces, but I have felt that I can't communicate with my films in that context. When I try to place them there it doesn't really work, because the way they're made there's

no narrative, beginning or end. It's much more a physical communication that I'm after. You walk into the room and there's something going on, there's an atmosphere that you can feel somehow. But as soon as you sit down in a cinema, even though you would have perfect sound, good image quality, you're reading the image in a slightly different way. You sit down and you might get frustrated with the film because it's not serving you what you want. By building the constructions that we have in the gallery, you can move around, you can spend time, you can walk in and out, and you are physically active. Of course, you are using your head, but I like it when the films communicate in this physical way.

*I'm interested in how much of your work is inspired by music, or more specifically the way that music impacts on our everyday lives. This is very clear in the work **You Don't Love Me Yet** (2003, 07.43 min/loop). The video is from a recording session at Atlantis Studios in Stockholm, and features around 40 musicians performing a cover version of a Roky Erickson song that was originally recorded in 1984. Can you say why you chose that song?*

I have been working with music parallel to art for a long time. In 1997 I started the record label 'Make it Happen' with my brother, to promote unknown artists. I've created music events or productions mainly within the music scene, not as art projects. Sometimes we have done things with the label in art contexts because we were invited, which is nice for meeting different audiences, but I found this a little bit problematic sometimes. There's some kind of hierarchy in the art world when you work with music, because in the art world the visual comes first and music is somehow a second strand. But for me, because music is always so important, it's equally art. It's been quite painful to work with music and musicians, to see that when music enters the art world it gets treated in a different way, or is listened to in a different way. It wasn't easy for me, because I wanted to mix things up, but I also wanted to make sure that everybody had respect. After a couple of years of touring *You Don't Love Me Yet* I became more sceptical about mixing art and music.

You Don't Love Me Yet by Roky Erickson was just a song that I happened to hear. It's not a very well known song, its meaning is very ambiguous,

and I was interested in the way that the lyrics seemed both disillusioned and hopeful. I was thinking about the scepticism within music and art, and also about love and relationships. I'd been working on a lot of collaborations, and I was interested in how difficult it can be to let go of yourself and lose control when you collaborate. I also thought a lot about people around me – the way that people wait to move in together, or perhaps put off moving in with their partners, because maybe they feel it's more important to hold on to their independence. It's really good, particularly for a woman, not to be dependent upon a man, but it can become so extreme. You can value that independence so much that you can't move on – you get stuck in a way of living that is not really what you want, but just something that has become the social norm.

Do you think this is why you chose local bands and unsigned bands? I respond to the work very much as a way of looking at the unsigned band or emerging artist, that kind of desire to be visible, to be wanted. Is there a relationship between the song and the situation for emerging or younger artists?

That's very much a part of it as well. The project started with a live event in Stockholm where I invited 20 bands to make one cover version each. But then the whole project has been touring, and it has developed, in that many local institutions themselves choose which bands they want to invite. The whole meaning of the song has been interpreted so many times now – there are about 200 versions.

Do you ever see a point when you end the You Don't Love Me Yet project?

Well, I tried to – I thought we were going to end it a long time ago, but then I realised that every time somebody contacted me they wanted it to continue. I felt the whole project was about letting go of yourself and doing something for somebody else. That's also the whole idea of doing a cover, another person's song. I feel that I shouldn't be the one who stops it. Creating collaborations between local art institutions and music venues was also important for me. These different venues often hadn't collaborated before and they would be sceptical. Sometimes the money for the project would come from the music world, and sometimes the

money would come from the pedagogical department of an art institution. There were always fears – what will we gain, what will we lose when we enter into this collaboration?

In the art world there is this idea that to repeat something can be good, but you cannot repeat it too much because then it loses its value. But in music or theatre, the more you tour with a play or piece of music, the more it is performed, the better. The work is seen by more people, and that's fantastic. I am sure that there are a lot of people in the art world who think that this project was really interesting to begin with, but now it has become repetitive [*laughs*]. But that is why I have to continue, because otherwise I am trapped in the rules.

Another Album (2006, 28 min/loop) features a selection of garden recordings on Krapanj Island, Croatia. You have also produced a 12" vinyl featuring some of these recordings. What was the starting point for this work and why did you select this group of people and these songs?

This actually relates to the other film that we're showing in the exhibition, *Magical World (2005, 06.12 min/loop)*, a collaboration with a group of children in a music cultural centre outside Zagreb in Croatia, where I was living in 2004 while on a residency. The piece involves a group of children who are singing in English, a language that isn't their own, struggling to pronounce it, with little understanding of the meaning of the song. It was about transformations, the changes that were taking place in Croatia, and about having a personal voice. You get in this situation as an artist, where you are invited to go to different places and you have a budget to make some new work in that context, but you can become a weird kind of tourist. You're always invited to go to a new place, and it's very seldom that you're encouraged to go back to the same place again. It's very easy to just scratch the surface, and so I wanted to go back to Croatia to make the work *Another Album*.

The participants in Another Album seem very relaxed, as though they are all friends. I feel like I am watching a fly-on-the-wall reality film, but the singing of these particular songs is obviously orchestrated. So how does that work? Tell me more about the participants.

The people in the film are the musicians and friends that I met while making *Magical World*. When I met up with them late in the evening they would often sit and sing all these songs that I first thought were very traditional folk songs. But there was something about their engagement, and the way they were singing, that was so important for them. At first I thought they were singing to show us this traditional music, but then I realised that it was music from the 1980s and that they would sing together a lot when a certain group of them came together. The more I asked them, the more they told me about the back ground to the music, songs from the 'golden novi val' (new wave era) in the ex- Yugoslavia. This was a rock scene that was similar to a music scene we had in Sweden. They were singing their versions, their covers of music from that era. This was interesting to me – a group of people singing music that wasn't really their music – they were too young to have been part of that period. The period when the civil war started was the time that their generation's music would have developed, so there was this interesting gap in the music of their generation.

I am also interested in the structure of your films. Why are many of them looped?

Most of my films are looped, but it depends on what the films are about – the loops have different functions. It started with *Project for a Revolution* (2000, 03.14 min/loop), where it made sense to work with a loop as 'revolution' means a circular movement. I was also interested in emphasising the waiting in that film – the people are sitting and waiting – it's the feeling of being stuck in something that you can't get out of. There is this guy in the film who comes and leaves in different parts of the work, but because it's a loop you cannot really say if he's coming or leaving, and you don't really know if he wants to be there or not.

The starting point for the film is based on a moment in the cult film 'Zabriskie Point' by the Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni. This re-created scene is set in present day Sweden. What was it about this film that you were interested in? Why did you select this particular scene and does it matter if the audience has not seen the original film?

The Antonioni film is just a starting point. The original film is set in a particular moment after 1968. When I was thinking about making the film I was also thinking about my parents' generation, about the idea of society attempting to change or transform things. There was a generally much more collective way of thinking, living and doing. We are one of the first generations to be given the opportunity to invest in our individual careers and to choose what we want to do. It's a tricky thing, to have all this freedom to do what you like, which you know that the previous generation didn't have – it's like you have a moral responsibility. So many young people are working like crazy and really burn themselves out. It's not just because everyone's so individualistic and wants to be famous and successful, I think it's also because a lot of people believe that they have to work really hard because it is such a privilege to be in our situation. People work a lot and we are a very stressed society. We know this, but it's still difficult to really understand why you're doing it – because you've chosen this life for yourself, and you think that you would automatically do what's best for you. That is a thread in a lot of things I've done.

Magic & Loss (2005, 16.52min/ loop) is a film that shows a group of people in an Amsterdam apartment packing and moving belongings. The participants seem to be related to each other only through the action of packing. Having worked in galleries for many years and having just moved to Dundee, I related to the monotonous and repetitive task. It made me think of art handling, and of my relationship to everyday objects and situations. Can you say something about your motivations for making the work? Does it relate to other artistic precedents?

It's a quite open film, it's a little bit mysterious, and I like that about it. You can identify with the work in so many different ways because this packing is an experience we all have, it's so much a part of life. This thing of packing down all of somebody's belongings – it can be the remains of a life. The other films we've talked about so far are a lot more emotional and nostalgic, in a way. The people who are packing in the film don't know each other and they also never met the person who lived in the apartment. That was the starting point for me, because I was interested in what happens when packing becomes some kind of job – you don't have this personal relationship to the things that are being packed.

When did you first think, right, I'm going to make a film with people who are going to pack these objects, and I'm going to pick a particular type of apartment?

It's a mix of different things. I was invited to do something for a project in Sweden called 'on disappearance', a show to mark ten years after the sinking of the ship *Estonia*. Many Swedish people were involved in this terrible accident – it is still one of the biggest collective disasters to affect Sweden. In some places entire communities were lost, it was tragic. I started to think about the consequences of these big, traumatic events, where a lot of people disappear at the same time, where you might not have your family and friends, and you would have strangers come and pack up your whole life. The exhibition was so problematic and sensitive that the institution could not complete the show – it was such a difficult thing for so many people. I had already started to think about this, and I was also really interested in this activity of packing and the relationship between the person and the object, when it just becomes something you do automatically, so it would somehow be without emotion. But, it still is very emotional for me.

I was in Amsterdam and thinking of a project to do there. They still use hooks and ropes to hoist large objects like furniture in and out of these apartments. It's really practical, and it's also very special, the way these private things come out into the open. When you walk around Amsterdam you are constantly aware of this relationship between public and private, and so I decided to do this project there.

How did you select the participants?

I didn't want the people to know each other, and they had never met this person who lived there. It was a bit difficult, because I didn't want to use actors, but at the same time we were really moving things out and emptying the apartment – it was a big responsibility.

So a person was really moving, and you were helping them out?

Yes, she really needed her things moved out. But you know I couldn't just

leave my house to strangers like that. At the same time that I was making this film we were also packing down a house, of a person who died in my family. So at the same time that I was editing the film we were also in the same type of situation.

Because I have worked in a gallery and museum context, whenever I see packing I think of art packing. I think that is particularly the case when you see a film like this being shown in the context of an art gallery.

It's a bit weird in the film, because the packers were strangers they were so careful. They were anonymous, and it's cold, but at the same time you see in the film a guy who's wrapping this stuffed animal, a teddy bear, and he's wrapping it in bubble-wrap! *[laughs]* We didn't tell them exactly what they should do, it just happened. They are packing so carefully, it's weird, so perhaps that's why it reminds you of art packing.

*You have presented **Where She Is At** (2001, 07.35 min/loop) projected onto a large tower construction. The work is shot at Ingierstrand, a run down leisure centre outside of Oslo in Norway. Of course I start to think about the location. Were you looking for a specific location for the idea or was the place well known to you?*

I was invited to do a project in Norway, so I was going there, back and forth, during the summer. I had all this freedom – it was one of my first commissions. Because it was summertime, a friend took me to this place. It's really beautiful and it's close to the city. There was a debate in the newspapers as there was a possibility that it was going to be demolished, and they had taken down some similar places around this area before.

While I was there, I watched this woman on the diving platform wandering back and forth and not jumping. That wasn't so unusual, in a way. It went on for a long time and everyone was really engaged in watching her. What was surprising was that many people got really annoyed and said that it was so bad, "why is she not jumping?", and "oh come on!" But at the same time, nobody else dared to go up there – I think the platform is about 15 metres high. I identified with her, I guess, because you have all this freedom, you're supposed to throw yourself off from the highest point,

and do your best, and if you don't it's a failure. In the film she actually jumps, and that is what happened when I was watching her. But at the same time, it's not like people were applauding, it's not something good, it's just that she had to do it. If she had walked down it would have been a failure. There's such high pressure and expectations. The film is a loop, so she jumps, she comes back and she just goes up again.

Missing Out (2001, 04.40 min/loop) is the film that I feel is most linked to the notion of traditional art. I think it's the relationship to composition. All the participants are lying on a floor in an irregular, but constructed pattern. I like the idea of collective reflection. Can you say more about this?

It's funny that you think of traditional art, because for me it comes from this childhood memory of when I was in kindergarten school in Sweden in the 1970s. This was an early memory, a strong visual recollection of lying on a floor doing these breathing exercises that we had to do at school all around Sweden at that time. I'm not sure if it's done as much today. I was so surprised when I saw this so clearly in my head, as I have very few visual memories from this time, when I was five years old, and I started to think about it. I think the reason I remembered it so clearly was that the teacher was looking at me and said, "look at Johanna, she's breathing well". I felt so embarrassed – it felt so terrible that I remembered it at all. I was singled out, I was doing something good and I got this compliment. It wasn't supposed to be about performance, but still, learning how to breathe was something that you can be better at than another!

In the film it's like you've got this collective activity with everybody in their own individual space, but you've got the one person in it that just goes to the window, or needs to go outside – just needs to escape it.

Exactly. When I was making this, my idea was I wanted to make something that, when you looked at it you would feel calm, like maybe you would start to feel how you were breathing. But the more I worked on it, I realised that it ended up being more and more stressful. You're really aware of this guy who walks to the window, who is not relaxed at all.

You are also showing these works in-tandem at Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland. It's really interesting for DCA to relate to other international venues that have similar interests to explore contemporary art. I am interested to know the reason why you wanted the shows to work simultaneously.

This is a weird question, because normally I don't think artists can ever decide when to show anything in any institution. I was invited by both places almost two years ago now, and it just happened that way. It's not a touring exhibition – the shows are not the same.

It was nice to use this collision in time to collaborate on the book, to create something more significant. It wasn't possible to make a new work for these shows, but instead the book has become a project, because it's really like an artist's book, with this collaboration, and using the designers Åbäke in London. We have a project in the book called 'expanded footnotes' because I was a little afraid of making this a big exhibition catalogue. Sometimes when you go to an exhibition and you have the catalogue you feel like, ok, this is the official version. If you ever wanted to know what this artist was doing, now you're going to know. Sometimes I think in contemporary art we actually forget that things should be interpreted. Different artists feel differently about this, but I feel there is no one official version. I really want the works to be experienced and interpreted on a personal level, and that's why we invited all these different people from different areas to write personal texts. Maybe you're more confused after reading it than before, but you can go in different directions.

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