

Lede: Elvira Garcia and Ghislaine Leung discuss critique as love's work, acknowledging written structures to rewrite them differently.

Ghislaine Leung's approach to art and writing is deeply interwoven. Creating a work that is vulnerable to its circumstances, which she coined as 'constitutional critique', highlights our common complicity in structures around labour, care, work - acknowledging them not as neutral but as practices both written and that can be written upon. Most of Ghislaine's work and exhibitions have an important element of the written word - scores that operate as open instructions, descriptions of a work. Formal elements that would have prominence in traditional understandings of authorship such as colour, height or position are not usually specified in these scores, acting more as informal music systems, in which the exhibition organiser or institution determines how the work is made. The use of scores not only facilitates the circulation and distribution of her work, but makes sure that the work is highly contingent both to the space as well as the people that work in each exhibition, highlighting usually opaque forms of labour within art spaces. In her latest show *Balances* in Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York City, Ghislaine relates for the first time limitations of her own life related to labour as an artist and as a mother into the structure in which her work is showcased.

I would like to start by asking you how you understand the relationship between your work as an artist and a writer.

I think my approach to both is similar, but they have a different grammar, and a different speed. Writing is central to my art in that a large amount of what I produce uses the structure of a score or instruction. One of the reasons I was interested in working in this way is to bring the work closer to the generative space of reading. The use of the indefinite article, 'a...' in a score for a work creates an interpretive vulnerability, but also a resilience because it doesn't have a singular or primary identity. We live in a highly written and prescribed environment. What interests me is working through these modes of writing, and understanding how things might be written differently.

Your use of scores is very particular. As you are saying they are concise, written pieces that describe a work that is completely vulnerable to its context. For example, in your work *Fountains* (2022) it reads, "A fountain installed in the exhibition space to cancel sound". How do scores and sound support your practice in such visual-dominated fields like art and writing?

I started working with scores not just out of some conceptual idea but a very pragmatic desire to find ways of working as an artist, and ways I could keep working as an artist, life inclusive. Working with scores offered me not only a different way to generate the work, but to produce and disseminate the work. They allow me to work with rather than against risk. Scores don't have set precedents, there is no primary way the work is made or done that takes import over a later installation. Scores were also a way to acknowledge how so much of the labour of art production happens, not with me in the studio, but at the level of exhibition, in how a work circulates, its discourse. That all work in fact, score or not, rests on these contingencies and is vulnerable in these ways, rests on our ability to carry and maintain it. And yes, key in that is that this speaks back to what, and whose, labour does and doesn't get valued. How we might try to redistribute that labour, accountability and maintenance inclusive.

You've previously spoken of your work being closer to the condition of reading as well as to the structure of writing. What interests you about placing those structures within an exhibition space?

I'm trying to understand the ways in which the structures around us are constituted - the way they are written, and we are written into them maybe - I feel like we, or certainly I, have learnt to read things in prescribed ways. For instance, the way we read a room or the way we look at an exhibition. These are not neutral processes, they are social and historical, political processes. For instance there is a great interview with the American artist Cady Noland where she is talking about trying to make a show that confronted these prescribed ways of looking at an exhibition; the time to spend in front of a work, the position your body holds, the way we move through space. I often work with different scales, either too large or too small, in order to play with that read. If something exists at a certain scale it tends to be read architecturally, or very small or low, as perhaps incidental or domestic. And these reads come from different institutional histories with different value systems. When these scales come together they lose their referent, and become opaque, plastic, it takes away the control. It alters how I read, and the value judgements and prejudgments implicit in those readings.

One example of the way you involve language in your work is how you coined and think through the term “constitutional critique”. Your work makes a point of defining the intimate/violent relationships that we all constitute. You encountered a way of thinking of critique among a context within contemporary art, in which criticism of power structures had been open to fetishization. At a time where the rumour that “critique had run out of steam” was spreading. Did it feel important to continue a labour of critique among such a climate of disenchantment?

Yes.

Ha. Okay, I can expand on that. That disenchantment is exactly why it is important, and difficult and fraught. But to paraphrase American writer and activist Audre Lorde, your silence will not protect you; if you don't act, someone else will act for you. We aren't looking at something, we are thigh deep inside something already. I started thinking about the term constitutional, as opposed and in relation to institutional, as a way to try and expand, for myself if no one else, out of that supposed impasse. It was a way to think about the body, as in your constitution, health, welfare, labour, and also the legislative and non-regulated frameworks that order our lives, our institutions and workplaces. The most important turn in that for me was to question how I work, what constitutes work, or a work, and how could I work in another way?

When working with words within art there is always a risk of them becoming assimilated by institutions and placed in the category of ‘jargon’. How do you balance that risk?

Making art carries a lot of risk. I spent a long time trying to get around that risk, to find some way to ensure the stability of the works, or the clarity of their politics. Ultimately, that just led me to not making work at all. The work I make comes from situating doubt as constitutive. I made a choice to try to make the kind of work, and have the kind of practice, that I hope will be okay without me in the world. Not because the work is robust but actually because it is highly dependent, it relies on a lot of people to live.

Constitutional critique presents us with critique not as a judgement/evaluation, but as a way to unveil the frameworks of judgement themselves. Your work analyses relationships between knowledge and power in which we often are complicit - how these foreclose/open the possibility of imagining the world in any other way. What does working with both language and objects offer when exposing the limits of the discursive deadlocks we are all a part of?

I think much more about materials than language and objects I guess. I want to understand and work with the materials already around me, to notice what materials are extant in our environments, because those materials are already so charged, so volatile. To think, as the British artist Ian White did so well, about the limit as material, conditions to be contested or negotiated. Those limits exist in me, in the exclusions I put on myself, in what I allow and do not allow myself, in the permissions I assume to give and take. These limits are lived, and it is often only at the point of refusal, that it becomes evident that things can go another way, that these structures are in fact malleable. That the world does not only have to be imagined as otherwise but actioned and lived as such.

There's a quote from your publication ‘Partners’ that has stuck with me. It reads, ‘Critique is not criticism, it is, in the most material sense, love's work’. How do you understand love's work?

Love's Work is actually a book by the British philosopher Gillian Rose. Published posthumously it somehow manages to combine the total rigorous quality of her philosophy with an utterly lived and embodied being-in-the-world. That particular line in *Partners* refers to that position. To understand criticism not as an assessment, but a personal involvement maybe. I was reading bell hooks on love recently, on this notion of the action of love, the work of learning, not what love is, but how to love. It made me think of Margaret Raspé, the German artist and filmmaker, who herself came out of a discourse on Actionism, but made these incredible domestic films, of these small, and often violent actions, making cream or schnitzel. Love's work is not only in how one might act to others but also to yourself, it is the most critical work one can do I think.

bell hooks' thoughts of love as an action and Audre Lorde's understanding of action, that you referenced before, convey a very heartening possibility of power. You have spoken on other occasions about Lorde's uses of the erotic in relation to writing. Do you think that writing brings a particular form of pleasure, a particular eroticism?

I think there is an intimacy in writing and in reading that can be incredibly powerful, and can resonate with you for a long time. It's about a one on one relationship with a work, how that can get inside you, allow you to feel yourself, and to think in another way. It's a relationship, and you become porous in that.

What is left of the solo artist when working towards shaping culture/power relationships collectively?

I'm a very solo artist. I mean I work alone most of the time, but I collaborate with everyone I work with, and those relationships are incredibly important to me. You are always making something together I think, the work rests on those dynamics. You can see it so much in shows, where you've been challenged, where you've been supported. Where you have been both challenged and supported. For me it's about the work of solidarity, of sharing and letting ourselves be held by each other, and that sounds simple but it truly isn't. So much community has been eroded by competition in our industry and it takes a lot to build another way of working together.

Can you tell me a bit about your show *Balances* at Essex Street?

Sure. It's work that I've been holding for a long time I think, maybe five or so years. And it's maybe the first time that the structure I've responded to isn't just the gallery or institution but my own way of working. For instance many of my scores for wall paintings flex to the size of the gallery or the wall space made available to me, they are dependent in this way. These new works are dependent in another way. So for instance, the score for a wall painting *Hours* is: "A wall painting the size of the artist's home studio wall divided into all the hours of the week with the portion of studio hours available to the artist marked in black. Thursday 9AM-4PM, Friday 9AM-4PM". Rather than working flexibly around another system or structure, I am making the requirement that the system and structure works flexibly to me. A great deal of my work in the last few years has been trying to notice the system and structures around us, and the endemic issues with these. Many of the works make insertions into these structures, or attempt to redistribute the power relations in the room. With *Balances*, this is the first time I have tried to engage not only with how these structures are written but begin to write them on a different set of terms.

This score in *Hours*, "Thursday 9AM-4PM, Friday 9AM-4PM" is the same text that features as part of your signature in all of our email exchanges. As the addressee, it really opens a space to imagine what the person at the other end is doing with the rest of their week, an invitation to be concise but also imaginative - breaking the apparent constant availability that we all are too exposed to.

Yes, I think that's really important. The moment I put those hours in my email signature, I felt such a great sense of relief - like that is what I can do, this is my capability. With this show, as I said before, it was about thinking not only how to change the institution but how to institute differently, how to constitute a practice differently. Not only in how institutions and the industry treat artists but how we treat ourselves. Looking at that on a small level in your own practice has become very important to me. It's about finding a way to acknowledge my own position; working two or three jobs on zero hours contracts, maintaining a practice, invisibly working all the time and as you say, constantly available. And it isn't really tenable, yet we continue. Pushing back against that shifted beyond a desire to a complete necessity when I had a child, there was no way in which I could maintain that capacity. I had to institute certain regulations in my own practice. The work *Hours* isn't primarily about being a mother, it's about being an artist with limitations on the conditions of my production - limits that come from the terms of my employment, limits that come from the demands of childcare - limitations that are in fact life. And not seeking to overcome or conceal those limitations but understand what you can make with that life, from where we already are. Have you read this great essay '*The Tyranny of Structurelessness*'?

No, I haven't. What is it?

It's an essay by Jo Freeman from 1970 about formal and informal structures in the women's liberation movement. How when the movement initially started and these women were meeting together to share this space, there was an idea that these spaces had to be very, very free because having rules would be part of the patriarchy, part of the problem. But as the movement grew, because there were no regulations within these spaces you would get a lot of issues. If someone was very dominative within the group there was nothing you could do. It is interesting in a way, in trying to make a free structure what replicates is a very unfree structure that is external to that situation. Freeman writes about how this notion of freedom becomes this laissez faire attitude of neoliberalism. Deregulation is part of that system so it's thinking about ways in which you can regulate differently, find a way in which you can structure something else especially when that other structure is disguised

as free or neutral. In my work the scores in themselves attempt to do that by kind of writing a different system into play, but with the works in *Balances* it was the first time in which I concretely related those conditions of my life into that structure. In a very real and personal way, which was a little bit scary. But it feels good, it feels very liberating.

This idea of 'deregulation as an actual structure' that can bring both exploitation and self-exploitation makes me think of the words "home-studio" in the scores. You mention your home studio in the artwork - it struck me specially in these times in which working from home or not having a separate studio is not always a choice and can create a sense of confusion of spaces which are not regulated, in which care and other types of labour interweave.

Yes, absolutely. It's not only a lack of regulation but a surfeit of conflicting societal assumptions around who and what we should be in certain situations and roles. For the institutions and industries affiliated with each role there is an expectation that you be that role primarily. It becomes evident when we use the same space for a number of roles, like working from home, that this demand not only cannot be met, but cannot be made. That we are creating structures of hierarchy that do not correspond well to how we live. Again, I'm interested in what happens when you begin to acknowledge those conditions rather than concealing them. When the relevance of that primary and hierarchical status is questioned or redistributed and a new sort of architecture can be imagined. Not even a new one in a way, but the deliberate holding, and valuing, of the extant architectures we are already making.

There is a work of mine from 2021 called *Onions* featured in the Abteiberg exhibition PORTRAITS. The object itself is a painting and it is a copy of a painting that my grandmother had made when she sold the original. The original was a Renoir which is called, *Still Life with Pomegranates*. The Renoir was part of a collection of works whose management was passed to my grandmother by her aunt Julie Elias. In 1938 Elias and her son had fled Germany to Norway with much of the collection being sold under duress in flight from persecution. Neither survived the war and my grandmother, one of the few surviving heirs in London, who undertook the sale of works in order to pass funds back to the family. She liked this painting a lot so before she sold it she got it copied and when I was a little kid I thought it was a Renoir, I remember later thinking like "Oh its a secondary, it's not real, its fake, a secondary form". We always used to call it 'The onions', we didn't know they were pomegranates. And in another way, they aren't. This is the nice thing, that somehow in naming it *Onions*, in 2021, somehow that secondary is understood as valid, as enough.

The onions/pomegranate story is fascinating. It brings me back to bell hooks and how you mentioned you've been reading about her understanding of love as an action more than a fixed idea, object. How you reverse that first, acquired look of disappointment towards the copy, that look that saw it as an object instead of seeing it as your family's loving action.

Exactly. That action, to be able to have a plasticity in your own attitude - to yourself, to others, to circumstance - is an action. I think that is where critique lies; Love's Work. Acknowledging the actions that you are involved in and pushing to action something else. My work in the past few years has been really to think how I can not only acknowledge our institutional structures but institute differently. It is hard at the point of acknowledging but not that hard to enact it, I think. If you think about love, it is hard at the vulnerability point when you want to express something and you fear rejection, but once you've kind of stated that, it's easy to love, you want to, it is a desire.