

## THE CONDITION OF THE ORPHAN: A DIALOGUE

*Transcribed from a conversation that took place in Chicago on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010<sup>1\*</sup>*

Answer: But they love it...the thing itself...

Question: What "Thing" are you referring to? And who "loves" it?

A: The Real...the substantive real...audiences today are looking for an unmediated experience.

Q: But what does that have to do with your project?

A: Well, as you know, we are trying to create an Orphanage here in Chicago... an actual functioning Orphanage. It is meant to be a highly aggressive critique of thinking of human beings as raw and quantifiable data, which according to my admittedly limited understanding of neo-liberalism is one of its main tenets, perhaps best exemplified in the formulation of Human Capital...which to my ear sounds a lot like Human Collateral (as in damage)...abstracting human beings into statistics...into "real" numbers...So we tried to devise an approach for working with human beings as material that would follow this cold logic and we happened upon the figure of the Orphan.

Q: An art project using orphans as a means to stage a polemic against Human Capital?

A: Yes, I think so.. that's the basic idea. There are other figures to look to of course, but the orphan strikes me as peculiar and exceptional. The Orphan is often presented as the hero in myth, like Siegfried, for example; and more recently the emblematic figure in pop culture is Harry Potter. Occupying the central role in the popular imagination, the Orphan becomes a cipher for collective desire and aspiration and is thus a vehicle par excellence for ideology. Having none of the classic familial relations to hem in the narrative potentialities of the mythic Orphan there is virtually no end to the amount of projection that can be cast upon the character... They can, in a sense, do or be anything. In non-mythic terms Orphans often are the bearers of a brutally imposed ideology when they are conscripted into armies...think of images of rifle-wielding children in Africa, Latin American, and Asia. But obviously there are older models as well in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Q: Why not "The Prostitute" and open a brothel? Or "The Slave" and start an enforced labor camp, to tackle other figures of subjugation?

A: Well, I wasn't interested in becoming a pimp for one thing, plus both those options seem a little too over-determined. Those two figures in particular might tend to be read allegorically in an art project...and I don't want to allegorize anything. To my mind what makes the figure of the Orphan so compelling is that they are so ontologically Other that

1 \* At the participants' request we have altered their identities.

Dear John  
I have it on good authority that the Freud family does not approve of anyone making a picture of the life of Freud - so I wouldn't want to be apart of it first because of his great contribution to humanity and secondly, my personal regard for his work  
Thank you for offering me the part of Annie O and I wish you the best in this and all other endeavors.



their condition is in some very real ways unknowable...beings utterly devoid of rootedness ...an image of a type of radical dispossession that I feel gets close to this might be a scene from Akira Kurosawa's "*The Bad Sleep Well*", when the main characters step out of the tunnel where they had been holed-up and walk into a barren landscape... they survey the ravaged vista (which is surely a stand-in for the post-atomic bomb psyche of Japan) while recounting their past...I suppose it's perverse to draw a connection between the notion of the orphan and an image of a nation's near-total destruction.

Nevertheless I see trauma as always inscribed into the condition of the Orphan...which is obvious enough I suppose...A child is either bereaved of their parents, or the parent was in such an untenable situation that they gave up their own flesh and blood...either way the separation is traumatic...Another important aspect to keep in mind is that the condition of the Orphan is what we are all destined to assume when we suffer the death of our own parents. Somewhat paradoxically the Orphan is at once radically Other, but at the same time the condition of the Orphan lies-in-wait in each of us...waiting to reconfigure our whole mode of being in the world. So, the "condition of the Orphan" is a subject that spreads out in very complicated ways.

Q: Okay, that is all very interesting, but what does that have to do with the art? Excuse me for being so blunt ...but your stated critique and project seem vague, especially in an art context. As I think I understand what you've been describing, your project is predicated on some unknowable quotient of illusory ideas of Other-ness. This sounds like a giant hedge on, among other things, formal considerations and ethical concerns. Your formulation of the unknowable orphan gets you off the hook both aesthetically and ethically, no?

A: That's just it! I have no idea as to what form this project is supposed to take or its proper manifestation...especially since I don't actually like to work with people... as material I mean.

Q: Why not? Can't you work against your own taboos? Wouldn't that make your whole project more legitimate?

A: What is *legitimate* is certainly an interesting avenue to explore...but in answer to your question: No, I don't think this is the right approach to take for us. In fact we want to avoid the legitimate, or at least the legal. I am more interested in the printed lie or **Bold-Faced Lie**. The lie that is legitimated through print... so in a sense I am interested in legitimating the project, but more as a perpetration of a lie...The printed lie is one of the dominant modes of public discourse...and as such it is the site where the battle between the legitimate and illegitimate occurs today (think of techniques of swift-boating, W.M.D. or the Birthers).

Q: You seem to be taken with the classic binary of the real and the fake...which is a very old problem dating back at least to the Plinian fable of Zeuxis and the grapes and came back into fashion in a big way with the 2006 Whitney Biennale and its play on *Day for Night*. Is this where it could be said your interest lies? Isn't this, a good four years later, a tired discourse? I mean, can't we now agree it was *all* fake?

A: What was all fake?

Q: The stories, the archives, the adventures, the documents – both in the art world and in the political malaise of the past decade.

A: I am not sure I'd have any competence to address the constellation you're enumerating. But Yes, if you say so...It was ALL fake.

Q: So why not just do it then?

A: Do what?

Q: Create the Orphanage.

A: You mean...

Q; Yes...take care of Orphans...Do something constructive with your art...

A: How would that be constructive?

Q: You mean helping homeless children?

A: Yes, How would art help them?

Q: If your project is a critique of human capital, why not use the project as a means to do something good? Humanize the effort?

A: Children don't need my help...and besides most things we view now retrospectively as problematic began with the best intentions.

Q: How do you know? Have you ever attempted to help any children before?

A: Alright...so this might be a good time to explain what we actually did. Back in January we went in on a building together to set up the Orphanage on the south side of Chicago. We then started recruiting young people for a youth league...a sort a Chicago Komsomol...Practically we felt that if we gave out the basics – you know food, water, shelter, etc. – we could indoctrinate the children...mold them...sculpt them if you will...we had an array of athletic and artistic activities, mainly what we could afford.

Q: How did it go?

A: Well... for a few weeks..

Q: What happened?

A: We ran out of funding. Art without food is not art...it's a waste of time.

Q: What tangible results occurred? What insights, if any, were you able to gain regarding the condition of the Orphan?

A: None.

Q: None?

A: None. That's what I am trying to tell you. The condition of the Orphan is unknowable.

It has no relation...we can't "relate" to the Orphan.

Q: I'm sorry, but...*What exactly* are we talking about now? Maybe you could give me a name of one of the children?

A: Why?

Q: It seems to me that if you had a name the project would seem less manipulative... at least in spirit...but if you can't even recount a single name then it does seem like the Orphans just became material.

A: That's in fact what we were after...to establish the nameless Orphan. For us the Orphan was a mode of being...a living model of how to dismantle the proper name...to supplant the proper name with the common name...if we could do this then the condition of the Orphan could be "relatable" or deployed in other endeavors...

Q: So the child was just a tool?

A: Exactly!

Q: That's perverse in the extreme.

A: It had to be extreme. There was no other alternative if we were really trying to enact a serious effort at ideological inscription.

Q: Did you record any of this project?

A: You mean video-tape it? No, drawing was our sole means of documentation.

Q: Why?

A: We were distrustful of video as a medium...I mean for this project...it removes the subjective experience too much...we felt that the experience had to be totally subjective and subjected to our own sensibilities. Any witnessing had to be internalized from the eye to the brain to the hand to the drawing material...we didn't want an externalized filter...we wanted to be the filter...

Q: So you can present the Orphanage as a series of drawings?

A: Yes. The drawings aren't meant to represent...they are as Deleuze would put it...Diagrammatic...they perform a piloting function...a type of forecasting...we felt (somewhat quixotically) that if we made enough drawings the project would come into being.

Q: We are almost out of time...so one last question...

A: Okay...

Q: How does this project relate to labor? Artistic/intellectual labor?

A: Hmmm...I think I see what you are going for with that, but for the sake of consistency... I'll say (and really without trying to be glib) it doesn't *relate* to labor...It is labor...The Condition of the Orphan *is* labor! It does not, as I said earlier, relate. Does that make sense?

Q: Not really...

A: Then think of it this way...think of labor in terms of the expression, "she's gone into labor"...the birthing process...mysterious in terms of psychology and ontology alike... it's a wholly different mode of existence, no? Or: it is existence in its most raw state... it's as if in this moment when two cells divide into one...at the precise moment of this division...when the division holds the two together...no longer one, but not two either... who knows how long this moment really lasts?...Who would dare say? Labor and the Orphan are stretched in this situation like two ends of a rubber band...I am not sure I can explain it any better than that....

Q: So am I to understand that your Orphan project is itself labor? Labor as opposed to "a work."

A: Yes...it is a labor...not "of love" exactly...but it is definitely not a work, or even a "process" for that matter!

Q: I believe that is all the time we have left. Thank you for discussing your project with us.

A: You're welcome. It was my pleasure.

*-Dialogue recorded by Zachary Cahill*

\* for more on the Orphan Project please visit: <http://www.theorphanproject.com/>