

Why We Behave

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What follows is an introduction to *How We Behave* written for If I Can't Dance Studio. Because it's a studio I'm going to make it provisional, which means working on this text with the idea of adding new sections alongside future uploads, but also holding off from using it to immediately define the project. That's not to say it won't sharpen up. The trajectory of the project has included precise moments as well as blurry ones, periods when things come into focus and then lose it. The challenge for something that is social, interactive, and experimental is to carry it through moments of doubt. In this respect If I Can't Dance, an organization that provides something like an open economy for extended uncertainty, has been crucial in sustaining the *How We Behave*, allowing it to find its coordinates, gradually accrete and go on to new phases. The online studio residency being the most recent.

The studio invitation came in 2020 just after I had finished a three-year research project that involved significant commitments. The need to give this work my complete attention meant that I had to largely drop *How We Behave*, which at that point was getting shown in various exhibition spaces including Extra City in Antwerp and the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The sense of purpose that came from these commissions and presentations, which were small but important as a route map, on returning to the project several years later, has given way to a period of archiving and sifting through. I took the studio commission as an opportunity to go back and look again at what is a large but heterogenous interview archive compiled over ten years beginning in 2012 and still growing—the first step being to gather it all onto a hard drive.

What is *How We Behave* for? This question came up in a seminar as well as in a private conversation with an artist friend. This is a good question and one I hope to address over the course of this text and its various updates. What I can describe with confidence is the initial concept, with the proviso that the interviews and their storylines have exceeded the capacity for this to contain them. Hence the need for a revisit.

It began with something in *Vanity Fair* from 1983. A seductive piece of high-end 1980s magazine publishing wrapped around a serious conversation

between Paul Rabinow, Hubert L. Dreyfus, and Michel Foucault. The topic was *le souci de soi* (the care of the self) from antiquity. There is a suggestion planted somewhere in that interview (and characteristically ringed around with caution) that certain questions or problematics from the past, buried in historical texts concerning self-care, ethical conduct, and relations with others, might have a purchase on the present; that the practices and techniques described in these texts, could be useful in navigating the complex terrain of social relations pertaining to groups seeking emancipation from moral censure and legal discrimination, such as gay liberation and the women's movement. One of the limits of the *Vanity Fair* interview is that it only haltingly looks at cultural difference, and altogether neglects the question of race. The departure for the *How We Behave* interviews then, was to update this conversation looking principally (but not exclusively) at queer and feminist narratives addressing these concerns in the 2010s, and going beyond the western-centric parameters of the original.

In 2014, part-way through, I wrote a summary of the interviews to date for a text published by If I Can't Dance, as part of their "Performance in Residence" series. For this I drew up a list of terms relating to "life practice," which were used as coordinates for the interviews.

The terms included note taking, reading, work, exercise, walking, experimentation, production, diet, literature, theory, fiction, sensibility, structure, improvisation, poverty, risk, pedagogy, friendship, sex, promiscuity, abstinence, speech, death, disappearance, spirituality, old age. From this list I highlighted four terms—notes, theory, friendship, and death—when I edited the transcriptions.

Reading this list again today I had almost forgotten how these terms were used to orient a discussion about life practice. And in the meantime, another question had come to the fore to do with a lived politics. Here the focus was away from the "self" and toward the transformation of social conditions and relations bound up with how we formulate our lives. This idea comes across in many of the interviews as a complex entanglement between the micro and the macro political that transgresses a strict division

between the public and the private and goes beyond ethical consumption. One interviewee expressed this well when she said, that for her, "It's about getting politically conscious and understanding how this relates to my life. But then also figuring how do you be in the world in a way that matters, and in a way where you understand your politics as not only an abstract thing, but how it relates to how I go about my daily life. How all of this is part of politics." These concerns prompted a different emphasis as well as the subtitle "An Archive of Radical Practice."

The particularity of people's lives and how these intersect with larger structures is a question I wish to unpack, using the interviews as source material. But first, following the decision to track the various steps taken in *How We Behave*—from recorded interviews, to the transcriptions, to the edited texts, to mediations using sound and moving image—I want to go through these stages one by one and try to grasp a methodology. Even if after the event.

Starting with the interview. In my experience this is a scenario that is both interactive and contained. It is modest, requiring little infrastructure beyond a space, two or more people, their willingness to communicate, and if you want to document the interview, a notebook or some recording equipment, a phone will do. Jonathan Skinner describes the interview as able to generate "descriptions of the life world of the interviewee" and as "a craft technique" that can be used to "unfold the subject's life story." In his book *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach* (2012), Skinner explains this from the perspective of Anthropology giving an account of the terms and techniques used in that discipline.

In Skinner's terms *How We Behave* interviews would be described as thematic and semi-structured: that is, not working from a questionnaire on the one hand or going in unprepared and allowing for free association on the other. We start the interview with a brief explanation of the project and how the material might be used and then begin the conversation by asking if the person takes notes. This is a question most interviewees can relate to, as almost everyone we spoke to takes notes of some sort. It has the added benefit of being simultaneously detailed and open ended. After this we allow for improvisation, reaction, and creative choices to happen along the way, but always with the list of terms up our sleeves.

The questions in Skinner's book about the ability of interviews to gather accurate data were of less interest for the project. If it was going to be an invented type of anthropological field work, it would be one open to all kinds of fictions and self-representations. To be fair, Skinner's ideas about the ethnographic interview, as well as those of his sources such as Steinar Kvale (who provided the quotes above) hold open questions of veracity and truth telling. In what I assume to be a break with earlier approaches in anthropology, at another point

in the book the interview is described as a dynamic "meaning making" event and a collaboration between two people that builds on memories to produce stories that are both improvised and rehearsed, although rarely outright fiction. Skinner calls the interview a "ritualised performance space" and for my project with its habitus in an institution dedicated to exploring typologies of performance they inevitably sit within this typology. This was something brought to the fore in the video portraits where interviewees perform their own transcripts.

In *How We Behave* some interviewees might use the space to experiment with a fictional self with the idea that fiction means inventing a new personality—which is fine. More compelling though are conversations addressing what is already there. What is there, is mostly a complicated scenario with lots of moving parts, but here storytelling and narrative links can potentially bring new "forms of life" into focus. It could be that the interviewee has told their life story many times, or maybe it crystalizes in the telling. Either way the interview dialogue can involve an aesthetic dimension, the use of dramaturgy, or fine description, the "craft" referred to by Skinner, that takes us to the idea of the "bios as the material for a work of art."

For reasons that are too obvious to recount, these interviews though concerned with people's lives are very far from psychoanalysis. Indeed, the focus on practice rather than interiority could almost seem like a rejection of it. However, I live with a psychotherapist, and hear about case studies all the time (with, I stress, confidentiality being observed) and I can't help making comparisons. In the interviews, it's impossible not to recognize that there is unspoken communication going on. In some schools this would be considered part of the transference and countertransference process that is a key to the psychoanalytic relation, according to ideas developed in the 1950s by Melanie Klein among others. In psychoanalysis an understanding of transference and countertransference is developed across multiple sessions and becomes central to a layered reading of what is going on in the room.

For me, by contrast, in one or two meetings the attempt is made to collaborate on producing an account that will potentially go on to have an audience of readers, listeners, or viewers. But nevertheless, what the interviewee chooses to talk about, how their idea of who I am affects this, what preconceptions determine my line of questioning, and how all of this gets communicated between us, remains open.

One to one conversation with a psychoanalyst takes place in a clinical setting and this already sets the terms and conditions. *How We Behave* interviews happen all over the place, although I try to establish in advance that the setting will be suitably contained. This is itself a development. At the beginning we

toyed with the idea of going out on the street and doing sort of vox pop interviews with passersby, before deciding on a set-up where a group including the interviewee sat around a table while a stenographer recorded the conversation. It was both informal and staged and we met like this in various institutional settings, such as the USC Roski School of Fine Arts in Los Angeles, Casa do Povo in São Paulo, and the Showroom in London.

It felt like an integral part of the project, and so it was a wrench to leave it behind when I conducted interviews in India where logistics would not extend to this format. Since then, the interviews have been conducted mostly one to one, and have taken place in people's studios, their homes, in empty workspaces, staff rooms, though Zoom, and indeed once on the street. I try to be conscious of how each setting shapes the interview, at the same time as sustaining a focused concentration. In one instance, the conversation on the street, the setting produced an account of a homophobic attack involving the interviewee that took place nearby, as well as a performance to mark the event. In more changes, I had always ruled out online interviews until the pandemic when they became the only way to keep the project going. Post-pandemic online interviews have become a way to connect internationally without excessive carbon emissions.

Finally, to the demographic. As a shorthand I describe the interviews, rather than the interviewees themselves, as emphasizing queer and feminist narratives, or at least those are the ones I privilege. The term queer, because of its slippery nature can mean anything and nothing and for this reason many have left it behind. But as Judith Butler points out in a recent interview, in the past the term queer seemed to allow for a coalition building based on multiple sites of oppression besides class. And more recently there has been an interest in how queer minoritarian positions intertwine with class and forms of economic exploitation as well as how a reading of them allows us to understand class in more complex ways.

The class position of individuals who have taken part in *How We Behave* would need to be looked at in their particularities. The majority are involved in producing culture in one way or another, mostly in the fringes of the art world, often with a foot in academia, many engaged in some kind of political activism—a privileged group to some extent, certainly in terms of access to travel, knowledge, and cultural capital. But if, as Holly Lewis suggests, we avoid seeing class as a cultural category, understood as the way we speak, dress, educate ourselves, arrange knives and forks and so forth, but instead as something concrete and based on economic circumstance, we get a different picture. While the art world is adept at suppressing extreme income disparities within its ranks, most if not all the people I interview own few if any assets, and so need to stitch together a precarious life on the back of artistic and writing commissions, speaking

invitations, and part-time teaching jobs. The price perhaps for keeping the space open for a creative practice. *How We Behave* interviews are interesting in particular, when we hear about how these creative practices extend to the life world, or ask questions, such as, wouldn't it be better if insecurity and the need to compete weren't seen as the cost of a non-alienated life?

(to be continued....)