



ON 'DEPARTMENT OF X' AND THE SCIENCE OF TRANSFORMATION

/ Jacob Jessen

In 'Department of X' specific voices speak more or less abstract sentences of a scientific nature. Every time there is a pause between the voices the light turns off, and darkness prevails, but only for a short while before a voice speaks again, and at the same time lights up the space. In the department one becomes the centre of what seems to be a (somewhat interrupted) conversation between eight scientists. Sentences like "But there is a problem with sharing knowledge, because knowledge is both a fact-based knowledge, but on the other hand you have the more tacit or implicit kinds of knowledge that are more related to each individual or each group's bodies and things we can do, but we can't explicate it or put on a paper and say what exactly we are doing" or "The generation time of a cyborg will be much longer than what we encounter. It will be maybe infinite!" follows an unpredictable pattern that does not lead to consensus, that does not lead to agreement or disagreement. Rather the individual statements leave their specific claims to knowledge, shaped by the individual scientist, echoing in the statements that follow. Thus a layered complexity of questions and thoughts start to form almost physically, in the otherwise structured emptiness of the space. Dissecting the designated emptiness in varying directions the voices are wrapping up the viewer in a cloak of next-to knowledge. One infecting the other – not breaking with or disagreeing, but giving shape to something different – a state. A presence of collected, overlapping not-knowing. Not unified (or singular) claims to knowledge, but a network of potential connections, not yet actualized. In the space every new visit to the piece forms a unique aesthetic experience. Not because all visitors are different and perceive differently, although they might, but the specific layering of statements, which is shaped by the algorithm controlling the order of sentences in combination with human perception, is new. Each experience of the work in the framework of new materialist and post-humanist thinking. Nanna K. Hougaard outlines this thoroughly in the thesis contextualizing the piece, and it is indeed a relevant discourse embedded in the work.

At the core of new materialism lies the break with correlationism – the interdependency instituted by Kantian philosophy between thinking and being, that claims that being cannot be thought of apart from a subject. This, ultimately in the course of the last centuries, has formed a number of philosophical dichotomies among which the understanding of Nature as something divided from Culture is dominant – the ordering of what relates to human activity as different from what by traditional standards does not - the Nature/Culture divide. 'Department of X' successfully addresses this outdated conception and in the framework of New Materialism calls for a new scope of vision. The work seeks to dismantle prevailing patterns of knowledge production by resetting and re-connecting our understanding of how scientific knowledge operates. However, I sincerely believe that the real success of the piece has to do with the transformative potential of the installation.

But what does transformation mean?

Returning once again to the exhibition space, I would claim, that this is what they are re-searching in the 'Department of X' - transformation is what is at stake in 'Department of X'. When the sentence "All particles get entangled, all the time, everywhere.." enters the space and is followed for example by the sentence "We sort of invented time. With the clock, we invented abstract time.." what takes place has less to do with communicating a combination of certain (or less certain) pieces of information, however interesting and relevant they become together. It has more to do with embedding the space between the statements as a potential with the viewer. This is where the transformation happens – the work transforms the dichotomy of Nature & Culture, by generously offering the unknown X as a perception within each of us. Not intellectually, although that might be the case, but physically, in the empty space under the light of the unreliable LEDs. On the platform, those voices shape the edges of the world that I know and feel at that moment. When they become silent everything stops. And when they start again the universe starts expanding again. In the gaps, I fill in the "particles" that "invented time" and "entangled" by "how to count time" and an unpredictable number of additional layers of knowledge that rotate, exchange, shift shape, change place, dissolve, reappear and eventually transform my perception of a world defined by the fact that I am in it.

The real success of the 'Department of X' is that it invites its viewers to become a reinvention of reality by way of transformation. And when I leave the dimmed lighting of 'The Department of X' I am certain that the ramifications of that transformation will continue to unfold in the department and myself.

This text is also published in Nanna K. Hougaard's artist book, Department of X. Department of X was exhibited at Lydgalleriet 10.01.– 02.02.2020



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