

Daniel Peltz interviewed by the curator Helena Scragg in preparation for Peltz' exhibition *Performing Labour* at Norrköpings Konstmuseum

Helena Scragg: *Performing Labour* is a project where artists were invited to work in the Rejmyre Glass Factory. Why was it important for the artists to work the same hours, side by side with the glassblowers, and to get paid a similar wage?

Daniel Peltz: These are the conditions I set as the research leader. It is part of how I am experimenting with and constituting the act of artistic research. We as artists within the *Performing Labour* framework are 'researching' by making artworks while inhabiting / being inside of / performing a set of conditions. The factory and its temporal, social and economic structures are being utilized to give a specific frame to a research *of* labour, *through* labour. We could sit in an office in Stockholm, or in our studio in the building next to the factory in Rejmyre, and set ourselves the same task, 'make a product of and about labour', but the proposition I am experimenting with is that this thinking process is critically shaped by the conditions we inhabit while we do that thinking. The particular conditions at play in the Reijmyre Glasbruk are of interest to me, both the working hours, the [now unusual] short hourly break schedule and, perhaps most importantly, performing an intimate, embodied physical labour, like craft production [or art making], while also having that labour touristed, i.e. viewed from the outside, abstracted as a kind of spectacle. I am researching/wondering about/concerned with this latter condition and see it as a metaphor for a set of larger societal transformations.

Could you develop on these societal transformations?

I am interested in how we think the needs of a human [or other than human] life in a world that is increasingly mono-capitalistic, i.e. embracing neoliberal capitalist ideologies as the only viable belief system. Frederic Jameson writes, "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism". I find this a potent summary of one of our most challenged and simultaneously most vital areas for imaginary development.

I'm interested in how the project of making a company town, which involves an attempt to think a complete container for a human life, is something of a ready-made conceptual gesture that can be revitalized to examine the ways human life and its needs are being constituted/might be reconstituted in a late capitalist world. Creating a refuge for the people who inhabit a company town, after the company has left the town as an abandoned asset field, is a way of considering all of our fates. Whatever value we have in/under capitalist logics will fade, and for many of us that value is/was already scant.

What is it that you are seeking in your research?

I'm not sure I can reduce this to a single or even a defined set of things. I am intentionally studying without aim, this is a purposeful act and an antidote.

How long did the artists stay in the factory for the Performing Labour-project?

Our engagements ranged from two-weeks to two-months [the longest being Sissi's and my stay].

How did you choose artists to invite?

There were two main rounds of the artist-guest-worker program, one in June and one in August: for the June period, I chose young artists, whose work I knew well and who I trusted, former students from the U.S. and current collaborators, whose intimate engagement with their practices I thought would be productively challenged by working under the conditions I'd set for the research. For the August period, the group was all from Nordic countries and was composed of people who had been part of our programs in Rejmyre in the past as part of our post-MFA program. I chose people whose initial engagement I felt was particularly strong and I wanted to build on this experience.

Part of our model with Rejmyre Art Lab has been to opt for depth over breadth. A lot of institutional funders are invested in a simple numerical logic in which more is better; if your program impacts 100 artists this is better than 10. Similarly, many funders privilege funding new initiatives over sustaining existing ones and often unintentionally mirror familiar values of neoliberal capitalism: innovation, exploring new models of collaboration between art and industry, etc. There are ways in which these logics, more is more, new is better than old, are sound but they impact artist practice, making it generally ahistorical [in relation to other artistic practices that have engaged the site] and rooted in shallow temporal experiences. We define our mission with Rejmyre Art Lab as 'long-term, place-based research'. My choices of artists were informed by this long-term preference in terms of investing in further developing artists' existing relationships to the site.

In the project the works made by the artist-guest-workers are represented through a Product catalogue. What did the staff of the factory think about the content?

I chose the product catalogue, as a form, as a way of engaging directly with a site I had been drawn to over many years of coming to the factory, the workers' break table and the product catalogues that it contains. The table is round and sits in a corner behind the primary glass blowing team. On the table, there have always been a set of product catalogues, from Jula and Biltema as well as from the factory's own products and industrial parts suppliers. I decided to title the Performing Labour product catalogue, simply 'Product Catalogue, Rejmyre' such that in the first encounter it would be no different than the other objects on the table. I'm interested in this moment of transformation, when an object goes from known to unknown to re-known. Not in either of the known moments but in that process of transformation and in making a claim for the fragile knowledge contained in this liminal state.

The workers sit there on their frequent breaks [every hour for 5-10 minutes]. They drink coffee, talk about anything but work and sometimes they flip through these

catalogues. I was drawn to this break table, that is on the factory floor, because the break was exposed to the tourists although slightly further upstage from the location of the glass blowing, almost off-stage but also clearly not. Tourists can still come in and observe the workers while on break in this space but there is an understanding that the workers, and their break labour, are somehow less accessible, less clearly available for visual and auditory consumption.

I have been curious for a long time about how they were relating to these product catalogues on the break table, their breaks are short and clearly they don't make purchases from them in this time. I noticed they would look at them with a particular kind of half-attention, it reminded me of the way I would look at the back of cereal boxes as a kid while thinking about the school day ahead. I became interested in this state as one that contains a special kind of knowing/mode of study: the body at ease, engaged with something that has a clear purpose, but engaging it in a soft way that partially defeats that purpose. I wanted to make something to be encountered in this space, in this state and in this manner; an art work, that would not be perceived as an art work, at least for a moment. I also wanted to make a claim for this state and place as a mode of research analysis and for the validity of the ways of knowing it contains.

As to what the staff think about the content of the product catalogue, I don't know. This is very important. I don't know and I don't try to know. The staff and tourists analyze our research products in the space of the partial awareness of being on break or in the encounter with an object that doesn't quite fit into the historical narrative of the factory being presented at the museum. I am interested in casting the role of analysis into this unauthorized, liminal space in which it cannot [like the glass products being produced] be packaged and shipped off for sale somewhere else. It is literally not for export, not exportable. One of the dominant logics of research is that it is valid if it makes its findings visible, if it shares them with/'exports' them for other researchers. This sounds fine but I am skeptical, what of all the knowledge that is invisible? That consciously and unconsciously resists visibility? And I become more skeptical when I see the close alignment between the academy and industry under neoliberalism, who is all of this knowledge 'for', who is it really being 'shared' with and who is benefiting from all this 'visibility' and 'sharing'.

What do you mean by invisible knowledge?

By invisible knowledge I am referring to the knowledge of those who have been excluded. Those who have lost out in all the power struggles, a category referred to in post-colonial theory as the subaltern. I am also referring to all the subtle forms of knowledge that don't hold up to instrumentation or resist instrumentalization by making themselves impossible to hold.

I am thinking about the knowledge contained in the contemporary glass worker, not just the knowledge contained in the craft of glassmaking but also the knowledge contained in performing the labour of glassmaking as a deeply uncertain industrial economic proposition and as a tourist spectacle inside a tourist economy teetering on collapse.

I am thinking about the knowledge contained in the contemporary glass worker, not just the knowledge contained in the craft of glassmaking but also the knowledge contained in performing the labour of glassmaking as a deeply uncertain industrial economic proposition and as a tourist spectacle inside a tourist economy teetering on collapse.

Could you give your view of how the global economy has affected Rejmyre?

Rejmyre is facing a crisis similar to that of many former industrial areas in developed economies, should we [and if so how to] maintain labour practices that are deemed of cultural value in a place in which local labour has become too expensive to justify, in economic terms, relative to labour in less developed economic areas. Most places gave up on this long ago so places like Rejmyre that are still trying to figure out a viable model under current global market conditions are of some interest. Personally, I am less invested in economic survival strategies under existing valuation schemas/global market conditions and more interested in survival of the spirit under any conditions. My opinion is that being deemed impossible, simultaneously too expensive and worthless, has made Rejmyre as good a place as any to study/think how to give refuge to the imperiled human spirit.

One factor that led up to the Performing Labour-project was when the local hostel where the guestworkers/artists would stay was transformed into a housing for refugees. In what way did this experience influence the project?

It influenced our projects in Rejmyre Art Lab in many subtle and gross ways, not just the Performing Labour project, as the hostel was converted into refugee housing in 2013. It shifted the base for our programs from the factory town of Rejmyre to our much smaller village, Kalbo, 10 kilometers away as the crow flies. We had to figure out how to house people in our village and how to provide for their needs in a place without formal commerce. We had to make a kind of company town out of our living room, the local sauna club and neighbor's friggebods. But more importantly, it transformed the conception of these towns, in our area primarily Rejmyre and Hävla. They went from being worthless to suddenly having some temporary value. And I was struck by how unprepared I, and others I spoke to, were to consider what it meant to become a refuge. The noun part was understandable, buildings could be converted, rents agreed upon, but the verb part was much harder. How do you give and take refuge? This question was very much with me as I worked within the artist-guest-worker program I'd designed in the factory and developed the *Any Thing* and *a Refuge in Rejmyre*.

In year 2000, the Historical Society in Rejmyre made an ice dive in lake Hunn and documented it, your contribution to the Performing Labour product line engages with this event, why do you think it took place?

This is a complicated question in my mind. They made the dive to bring to the surface a linbana vagn [cable car cart] that they knew was lying at the rocky base of one of the linbana foundations in the lake. They did this in the winter because it was one way of bringing this object to the surface, using the stability of the thick ice to assemble a

tripod and a winch that could exert enough force to release the linbana vagn from the mud it is was buried in.

I learned this explanation of the event over time but initially I was captivated by the somewhat illogical and mysterious image of these men assembled on the ice, one of them diving into a freezing lake to pull up a piece of metal and wonder about it. There was something mythic to me about the scene, especially the wet clarity of the ice. I wanted to understand more about it but I also wanted to inhabit the mythic space it opened for me.

*You made a work called **Seeking an Any Thing from an uncertain time in the ruins of Rejmyre's Future** where an object you call Any Thing was inserted and extracted from the same lake during a second dive in 2017. In the film documenting the event the Any Thing turns out to contain a record that you play on the ice. Where does the sound come from?*

The full title of the product is *Any Thing, made to be lost and perhaps later found, perhaps in early spring, perhaps when the ice is still thick and clear*. It was my contribution to the Performing Labour product line. It is important to me to both create and fully inhabit the structures of the project. The sound on the record, that is embedded in the *Any Thing* and released over the ice, is of elephants logging teak in Myanmar. It is extracted from a YouTube video of a couple on their honeymoon who decided to visit these soon to be unemployed animals. It is a fascinating video in many ways, I'm mostly interested in this series of extractions/abstractions: the abstracting of trees as a resource to be extracted from the teak forests in Myanmar, the abstracting of elephant strength as logging labour, the abstracting of logging labour as a tourist experience/eco-honeymoon, the abstracting of a wedding ritual as a YouTube viewing experience, the abstracting of a YouTube video as a physical but transparent vinyl recording, embedded into a set of handmade transparent glass sheets and a hand forged iron frame.

You seem to be interested in making the viewer lose the concept of time. What do you hope to achieve by this?

I am interested in how, when we open the concept of time, we open an accompanying set of possibilities around other falsely rigid structures that determine what is possible in our lives and in our view of the world and its interconnections.

*The refuge for the elephants is represented as a model in the exhibition and developed in collaboration with the Danish architect **Kristoffer Tejlgaard**. Could you give an insight into how this idea came to you? Myanmar seems like such a long way away from the elephant's natural habitat and might seem like a very unlikely scenario.*

It is essential to understand that this is a refuge for elephants unemployed from the logging industry in Myanmar, not just any elephants. An article in the NY Times offers this sobering series of statistics on the life expectancy of Asian elephants:

In the wild - 56 years
In the logging industry - 52 years
In the tourist industry - 26 years
In a zoo - 12 years

I felt that there was some important connection between their situation and the situation of the glass factory. Building a refuge for them in Rejmyre seemed like a valuable way to find out what was inside this connection. One of the central lessons of my practice has been to trust those connections and to follow through on what they suggest.

If one thing is certain in our future, it is that many of us are headed towards inhabiting this category of refugee. I began to think, if we could take on the seemingly impossible task of giving refuge to these elephants, perhaps we would discover ways to give refuge to many others in need, including perhaps ourselves. How to do this? One way that occurred to me was to create a *pre-history* for the one who will attempt the more difficult task of taking refuge, such that, when they arrive, they will have already been there. I make a glass and metal thing in the glass factory, and the blacksmith's forge next door, a thing called *Any Thing* that contains a recording of these elephants at work. I insert the *Any Thing* into the display case at the historical museum, I slip it into the lake at the site of a linbana foundation, I stage an ice dive to retrieve it and then work with the historical society to acquire it, placing it back in their display case along with the video of the dive. Now, there is a product that was once made at the Rejmyre Glasbruk, a product that sits in the Rejmyre Historical Museum, a thing that was found underneath the icy Hunn, that attests to these elephants existence in Rejmyre. These elephants were already here, there is nothing unlikely about it, it is inevitable. When these elephants come to Rejmyre, they can visit the museum and learn about their complex connections to this historic site.

After establishing this pre-history, I commission the Danish architect Kristoffer Tejlgaard to make a proposal for an elephant refuge in Rejmyre to be built by local volunteers. I was drawn to his work after being asked to stage an event inside his *Dome of Visions* [a geodesic structure on the KTH campus in Stockholm that is virtually connected to a similar structure in Copenhagen]. I wondered at the scale and beauty of this dome that had been built, only temporarily, on this site. I wondered at what logics allowed so many resources to be deemed rational in building it. I wondered what would happen if we transposed the logic of connecting existing capitalist power centers, like Copenhagen and Stockholm, onto an 'abandoned asset field' like Rejmyre. I decided it was important to make that value proposition. That Rejmyre was actually more worthwhile than Stockholm as a place to envision interconnection and possible futures, as a place to expend resources in the service of posing the question, what is possible here?

The refuge is built based on a new model of architecture, that I am developing inside this project and have dubbed *Adaptive Pre-Use*. It involves a new structure being designed and built, by a specific community, for a very specific purpose that it will never serve. By committing ourselves to this seemingly illogical project, of sincerely

considering an other, and building a habitation for them, that they will never inhabit, we open a space of simultaneous possibility and impossibility that functions as a critical lens on a complex condition. When our work is through, we are left with a structure. I have faith we will know what to do with it then.

Can you say something more about how this practice of Adaptive Pre-use plays out in the specific landscape of Rejmyre?

This practice is particularly resonant in Rejmyre. A factory town born in the early 1800s in response to Sweden losing its glass industry in Finland to Russia. Rejmyre became a place where people made their lives because trees, as fuel for the furnaces, and quartz, as raw material for making glass, were abundant. Like all factory towns, the needs of human lives were secondary and what was built to satisfy those needs was rarely more than a functional attempt to think a human life.

Fast forward two hundred years, Sweden is facing an influx of newly arrived people, seeking refuge from wars in their home countries. Those charged with providing 'refuge' to those deemed 'refugees' encounter a housing problem, as the availability of cheap money at near zero interest rates and an existing shortage of housing stock has driven a massive increase in urban real estate values. The government officials charged with solving this problem look to largely abandoned post-industrial countryside towns as a solution. In this period, a former hostel in the center of Rejmyre, a village with few opportunities for work and even fewer cultural resources, is converted into a 'refuge' for newly arrived, unaccompanied young men. Places like Rejmyre, that the anthropologist Anna L. Tsing refers to as capitalism's 'abandoned asset fields', suddenly become temporarily valuable, precisely because the houses they contain are valueless. Many people think of Rejmyre as a factory town that produces glass objects but it is also, importantly, a factory town that produces refuge.

There was a highly circulated story in the Swedish news media, at the peak of the so called refugee crisis, of a group of newly arrived people being taken by bus to one of these rural towns that the government was reconstituting as a refuge. The story tells of the refugees refusing to get off the bus. It was a moment of concentrated disconnect between the ways in which refuge was being constituted, as an abstraction by government officials, looking to solve a problem and to simultaneously extract further value from what had been deemed a capitalist ruin, and the way refuge was being constituted and imagined by the people inhabiting this category. What was offered as a refuge was refused by the intended recipient, thus calling into question what it means to give and to take refuge. Can a refuge refused be any kind of refuge and what of those who already inhabit this place? Do they in turn become refugees? If we are going to think the complexity of this act, what it means to give and to take refuge, perhaps we need to experiment with new logics of being, *Adaptive Pre-Use* enters into this space.

I invited Kristoffer to come visit me in Rejmyre and we forged a bond that has led him to agree to develop an initial design for the refuge, for a refuge in Rejmyre, to be imagined, redesigned and built by residents as an attempt to ask and perhaps, in the

act of building, answer, the question: 'How might we give and take refuge, for our perilous selves and perilous others, in this abandoned place in which life still resides?' My hope is that it will serve as a platform to gather residents around, deploying the power of the art institution and the power of the architectural model, to allow enough people to take this forward to the next stage, to imagine, to redesign and to build this refuge with us.

The long-term commitment that you and Sissi Westerberg has made to Rejmyre is interesting. In the 60's and 70's when artists were making art in workplaces/factories they came in as fairly temporary visitors. What difference do you feel time has meant for your work?

The temporal frame we work with is vital to our practice. Current curatorial frameworks are extremely limited, based on a widespread acceptance of a set of deeply dubious logics. We are claiming our own curatorial framework [way of caring for art] by committing to a study without end.

For many of my personal contributions to this project and this show, they come out of things I was drawn to when I first came to the factory in 2007; the break table and this video of the ice dive. It took ten years for me to figure out how to work with those objects/sites. I am deeply grateful for having been given, having found a way to take, that kind of time.

Has it been beneficial in any way to come as a stranger to a very small village for you? Was it hard to fit in? (I'm thinking of the difference between involuntary and voluntary displacement.)

I have the freedom to come and to go and this is both a benefit and a liability. I have learned a great deal by being in this place. It has offered me a refuge from certain conversations and confronted me with others. It has allowed me to perhaps experience a version of what I have been told involuntarily displaced people experience, particularly in terms of going from a context in which you were considered capable, in which your skills were valued, to one where you and your skills are largely valueless and sometimes even suspect. My aim has not been to fit in. I have had occasion to think about the difference between acceptance and tolerance and refusal. I have experienced moments of each in myself and others.