

**Is it better to give or to receive encounters of variable success.
A series of observations with four encounters and four images
Julie Westerman**

Keeping my head above water (the hostess with the mostest)



Keeping my Head Above Water, 1999, photograph, 180cm x 130 cm

Thinking about the conference on hospitality caused me to reflect upon the often tangled unspoken and conflicted relationships that the tradition of the roles of host and guest present. The responsibility to give without agenda and the duty to receive with good grace are the unspoken rules of this agreement. I offered one visiting artist my very best hostessing; meeting/greeting, transporting/supporting, presenting/encouraging, wining/ dining, and an overnight stay on our arrival at my home she glanced at my house and asked, somewhat, dismissively, ‘When did you decide to buy an end of terrace?’ This led me to wonder if perhaps a self-centred belief in one’s right to receive is better than any moral high ground of selfless giving and therefore is a more realistic approach to artist-to-artist encounters. Perhaps the mechanics of giving and receiving establish a hierarchy where the giver is deemed (by the recipient) to be lower in status.

To be the host is already to employ a set of standards according to one’s own principals, but a relationship that leads to a collaborative work gives rise to issues of authorship; for example, is the host beholden to bequeath all ownership to the guest, to subsume all desire and ambition in deference to the laws of hospitality? When this is broken or challenged, is the host/guest relationship/pact rendered null and void? Or perhaps hosting and guesting is inappropriate or at least inadvisable when embarking on a collaboration.

An acre of the moon (a gift too far)



Lunar Deed, 2009, drawing on paper, page from chapbook, 30cm x 30 cm

While working on a chapbook for the *Transmission: Host* publication series (London: Artwords, 2008-10), a forum for an exchange between the hosting artist and her/his guest in the eponymous lecture series, my guest and I explored the Grand Gesture and the relationship a gesture forms between the giver and the receiver. The more I considered the idea of a Grand Gesture, the more I was struck with the weight of responsibility that the act of giving puts on the recipient, and I became convinced that it is predominantly a male mode of operation; the approach appears to fit with the short sharp effort with little forward consideration of the consequences of the act or the implications for the unsuspecting recipient. In order to explore the process and consequence of the Grand Gesture, my guest and I embarked on an exchange of emails in which we offered each other each other a number of Grand Gestures:

I offered the example of *Argument to Beethoven's Fifth*, with Sid Caesar and Nannette Fabray.

He offered me Endeavour, Pathos, and Desire.

I presented him with an acre of the moon, including a certificate inscribed with his name.

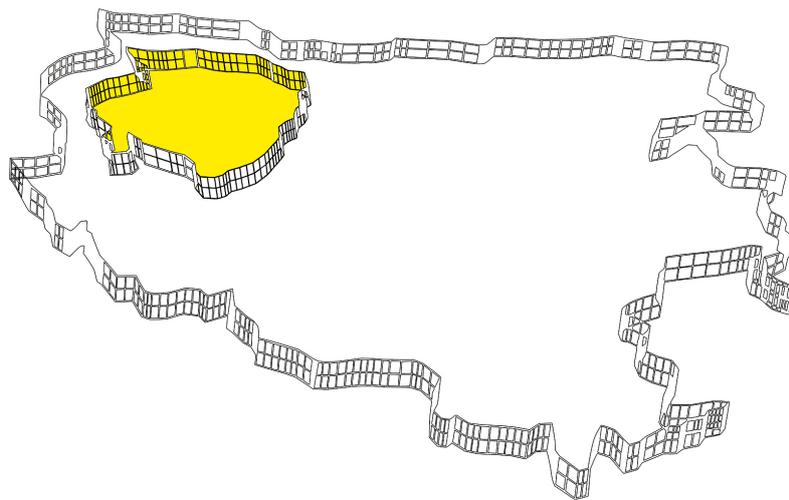
He offered me a personal insight, menstrual cramps, and Crohn's disease.

I was a little surprised that my gift of lunar real estate received so little in the way of acknowledgement. Perhaps I had overstepped the limits of our relationship and the uncomfortable

and personal response was a measure of the uncharted territory into which the gift had led us.

The responses expose the gap between the gesture and the receiver. And here I think lies the root of the question between the host and the guest: just as the Grand Gesture lays a weight and a responsibility upon the receiver and the enforced relationship that is entered into, the guest and the host are similarly tied. The host/guest relationship is often entered into blindly and in the spirit of the moment – the ground-rules are not agreed but rather assumed and when the event unfolds the cracks appear.

The Empty Drawing Space (impasse)



Yellow Crack, 2011, digital print, 120cm x 84cm

I approached a residency in Berlin and my stay in the city with keen anticipation. I was to be welcomed, hosted, and supported, so it was with a sense of anti-climax that I found that my artist-host was too busy to fulfil my obviously overly-demanding, even needy expectations. He generously did invite me to dinner by way of a welcome but poured my carefully chosen (and not inexpensive) bottle of wine into his cooking. Still, the evening did give us the opportunity to talk about his work.

The resulting exhibition *Drawing Space* was formed from the empty space between us, from our efforts (and inability) to inhabit the gallery space together, and from the pressure to produce an exhibition in a very short space of time. Conflicts between us arose over ownership of the space. It became a struggle: how close could we manage to position our drawings before they too fought, who would have the best space or occupy the greater territory. The strain to coexist amicably while not conceding territory took its toll and a crisis was inevitable. As we circled around each other, we produced an exhibition of drawings in which all the works addressed an illusion of physical things; the final drawings described what did not exist in the space. We had chosen to use the gallery at a point of transition between its unrenovated state, with the layers of countless incarnations of betting shops cafés and numerous businesses, and its transformation into a white cube space. My host proposed to use the three corners of the space for his work and insisted that the walls were all mine to inhabit. He saw himself as fitting in around me – however, it is clear that if one places a large, striking work in three corners, one has succeeded in dominating the walls to all sides. The ensuing standoff forced a dialogue about how we could truly investigate the transitional space in the gallery rather than simply cohabit as wary neighbours. In the final exhibition he worked directly onto the walls, ceiling, and floor, using tape and fields of colour to create an illusion of space that extended the gallery into geometric portals. My analysis of the traces left behind after years of

occupation focused on blemishes and scars, drilled holes and damaged plaster, cracks and craters, recreating them as CAD models and rendering them as graphic posters. All of the works describe the illusion of space, one where the architecture and the structure no longer or never existed. The tension in the collaboration was reflected in the final exhibition; all the works explored an illusion, an absence, a lack of substance, and exposed our efforts to find common ground. The boundaries, conditions, and expectations of the encounter had been entered into blindly and the relationship, such as it was, formed with unseemly haste – perhaps only now, in retrospect, are we ready to start working together.

A bridge between (what is common about common ground)



Tay Bridge, 2010, screen print, 46 cm x 46 cm

This project also began by extending an invitation to present a lecture as part of *Transmission: Host*, the third in the series of lectures addressing hospitality. It ended with a series of photographs, drawings, a film, a reading, and another chapbook, the third on which I worked in collaboration with my guest of the year. This time our enthusiasm for the project blurred the lines of ownership, which was only later exposed when the credits were written.

Both my guest and I had been using the image of the bridge in new works: my guest had been working on a text about a bridge in Frankfurt, exploring the endless crossings she described as a metaphor for being trapped, unable either to leave or to move, neither on one side nor the other, caught between two states, while I had been working on a series on drawings based on bridges that had suffered catastrophic failures, where the conceit of humankind meets the impartiality of the

nature.

My guest proposed to make a film that tracked the figure of a woman in a red coat (a frequent signifier in her work) walking continually to and fro across the bridge from dawn to dusk, from dark to dark, trapped in an endless story. It was shot during a bitterly cold January day and night. Working together on the film gave us an opportunity we both welcomed to discover something new about each other's practice. The finished film played for the length of her performance/lecture, allowing the original text work to be repositioned therein; the performance/lecture then became the context for a new series of drawings and a chapbook.

In preparation for the shoot and in response to my guest's research I reconnoitred the site; I scoped out the best places for the camera, explored the angles, refined the framing of the shots, and learnt to use the camera, following instructions in a foreign language. Time was tight and we only had one opportunity to shoot the film and then edit it. We felt united in the face of adversity. The film-making was truly a joint effort and the pleasure and challenge quite exhilarating. As a host my instinct was to enable my guest to make her work, but my high level of involvement in facilitating the project lured me into the delusion of collaboration; it rendered ownership of the project uncertain as I was neither an employee nor an agent. However, I did not edit the final work nor present it as part of a performance. All these niceties were inconsequential while making the work and needed no clarification until the credits were added to the work and ownership was attributed.

The discussions are all retrospective, of course, and the pleasure and excitement and unity of the making of the work that takes place in the moment are only deconstructed at the moment of going to press, when a declaration of authorship seems imperative. At that moment, ownership reasserts itself and singular possession is claimed. It is, once again, a matter of territory, laying claim and naming it, leaving me to wonder: when is a collaboration *really* a collaboration and what is the duty of the host?