

ENACTING THE FACULTY OF INVISIBILITY

From the very start, any art institution is a place that responds to the wish for assembly. Probably for no other reason has the Faculty of Invisibility been founded. Perceived initially as a fictional institute that would function self-generatively, in its works it aims to appear within formats of public organisation. That may still be insufficient to explain the modality of the Faculty of Invisibility. I could employ the white spaces between these letters here as an example to describe what the Faculty of Invisibility tries to focus on. These white spaces hold a balance between binding the letters together and preventing them from collapsing into each other. They go unnoticed and do not signify anything by themselves, but partake in establishing the readability of this text. The place of the white between the letters is one of a weak force, where pulling together and breaking away coincide. The proceedings of the institution, be it in formats like the opening, the exhibition, the invitation, the speech or its bylaws, I suspect to convey such a weak force and is thus an inherent place of undecidedness.

The founding event¹ of the Faculty of Invisibility in 2006, entitled *The Speech*, initially responded to the classical format of the symposium. Whereas usually expertise accounts for participation, and speakers and the sometimes interrogating audience are seated on different sites, *The Speech* provided a lectern for each guest, all of its speakers, and permitted no further audience. The persons that I invited I had met on different occasions. It was less their professionalism as artists or theorists that intrigued me, but rather the thought of the constellation they'd enter with each other that motivated me to ask them to open the Faculty of Invisibility with me. This required that each of them would preside over one of the Faculty's departments as a tutor. I asked my guests to think of what was most essential to their practice and to name their department accordingly. Furthermore, I asked them to prepare a speech, by which they would open their department.

„... though an event entitled *The Speech* will be verbal in character, you'll find me a wordless director, speechless when it comes to giving directions for what there is to be done. The lesson that is to be taught and to be learned within the Faculty is: How to read an invisible book and how to foresee its next chapter.“ (Department of Practice's inauguration speech. December 4th 2006)

During the three days that *The Speech* lasted, the Department of Common Spaces, the Department of Haunting, the Department of Post Autonomy, the Department of Reading, the Department of Uncertainty, the Department of Parasitism and Symbioses, the Department of Play, the Department of Survival, the Department of Learning, the Department of Speech Genres, the Department of Doubt, the Department of Practice with the presence of Roé Cerpac and Onedaynation founded the Faculty of Invisibility. These Department's speeches were, just as their subjects, very diverse in form, ranging from lists enumerating all tasks accomplished in life (Department of Survival) to attempting parrhesia, a manner of speaking by which all that comes to mind is said (Department of Haunting). What made them effective and bound them to each other was their companionship in co-authoring what the Faculty of Invisibility would thus become. It seemed that throughout the days of *The Speech* an understanding amongst the tutors was formed about the nearly limitless possibilities the Faculty of Invisibility could offer for ways of speaking and convening. It was possibly due to that understanding that upon the foundation of the Faculty of Invisibility followed silence.

About six months later we released the opening speeches to be distributed by the tutors

¹ The founding of the Faculty on 6/7/8 December 2006 took place at and was supported by the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, NL

in the *Communiqué*.²

BETWEEN THE LETTERS

„Now that I start writing to you, I have to admit that to recognise you always already means to miss you.“
(Letter # 1)

Upon an invitation to create a new work of the Faculty of Invisibility three departments gathered, only to acknowledge that upon its foundation the Faculty of Invisibility had already been over. That it would not be prolonged through motivation, through the continuous engagement of its founding members, or by initiating new productions in which the different departments would gather. Not even a series of events could assure the Faculty's existence. Instead the Faculty was in a continuous mode of having passed. It was therefore a modality that could persist and achieve an identity only through being founded over and over again.

In the first instance the Department of Reading, the Department of Haunting and myself as the Department of Practice engaged in a new founding of the Faculty of Invisibility. This time – differing from the exclusivity of *The Speech* – we conceived the new place for the Faculty to be dispersed amongst its public. A public that would still have to be formed by means of the Faculty's new work. In order to distribute the Faculty of Invisibility amongst its audience we decided to settle an event in the past and to invite the public to it. An event in the past naturally remains unattendable. In order to call in a public that would be willing to acknowledge an event in the past that had been left unattended to be part of their memory, we had to design a gesture that would have to insist and persuade an empty space to be inscribed into memory.

In *The Invitation*³ an announcement card prepared the addressees – with a request to not reply – that they would receive a series of six letters that intended no harm. Our address list consisted of approximately 550 persons whom the three of us personally remembered or whose addresses we had received from friends who we had asked to think of people they had once known or were on the fringe of forgetting. As a manner of insistence we chose for a series:

„I apologize for my hastiness. If I have the time, I will try to speak of the space in between my letters, the gaps and silences that I write as passageways.“
(from Letter # 3)

In the course of the three months in which our letters travelled with postal delay, got lost in the mail, touched on, missed, reached and surprised their receivers, the thought of 550 people simultaneously receiving our letters came to haunt us. Our letters, Courier type-set, A4 sized, sealed in standard envelopes with machine-typed address labels and written in four languages, were meant to trigger their receivers to ask themselves who was writing to them, who was addressing them in such a way and to whom in turn they themselves would have written such or other letters to. The letters were sent out irregularly and, although announced, they remained unexpected.

² <http://www.think-tank.nl/faculty/Communique.pdf>

³ *The Invitation* was part of the exhibition project Master Humphrey's Clock curated by de Appel Curatorial Course 2008. It was further supported by Het Blauwe Huis, a residency for the mind initiated by the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk.

RESIGNING

Between the sending of those letters we came to witness the manifestation of a strange quality, something unknown to both our readers and us, though intended and put at risk in them. As if we had succeeded in relating to and withdrawing from an audience in one single gesture. Recalling the experience of inaugurating the Faculty of Invisibility in *The Speech*, we came to think of the effects that employing the commonly known under a different regime of use could have: just as the speech, the letter, the address, the postcard, were turned into something different, something strange rather than estranging, could we not indeed conduct the institution itself under a different rule? But before we began to speculate further on the Faculty's future, the three Departments that had authored *The Invitation* wrote a poster to the founding tutors of the Faculty in which we asked them to resign:

„Responding to that tendency of decay, which always already works in each law and every institution, You Can Leave Your Post Now announces the resignation of the Faculty of Invisibility. (...) The more horses you yoke, the faster it goes – namely not pulling out a block from the foundation, which is impossible, but the tearing apart of the reins and thereby the empty cheerful ride.“⁴

TO COME INTO FORCE

Currently within the Faculty of Invisibility⁵ we are concerned with the measures and proceedings that put something into force. Law, regulation, habit or custom are employed in our lives, though their coming into effect may escape our notice. As an exemplifying institution the United Nations showcases these enforcing processes as performative acts of speech. Through adopting resolutions, commendations, decisions and amendments made to each of these, the UN acts on national law and establishes international conventions. In its writings the UN constantly refers back to previous documents and decisions, summing up its own history in order to maintain it.

To constitute an institutional body exceeds by far the act of inscribing it into the register of associations. It is established rather as a constant work within and on language. In the roles and positions it evokes, in its convening function, in addressing its audience, through permanence and constancy it establishes visibility and achieves recognition. Aiming to guarantee utmost transparency, the United Nations' documentation, recordings of meetings, protocols, press briefings and resolutions are available for public consultation. While observing these proceedings⁶ within the United Nations Security Council and other UN bodies, it is not the question of their political effectiveness that we are most concerned with. Though it feels impossible to relate to the institution's global scope and effects in a personal manner, the following observations indicate ways to look at the UN differently. The highly controversial and debated speech of Al-Qadhafi⁷ in front of the General Assembly on September 23rd 2009, exhibits, for instance, beyond all its political implications, a corrosive use of language, an eccentric murmur that in effect is able to suspend just for a brief moment the conventions constituting the UN. Observably in the proceedings in which the world's

⁴ The poster *Resignation* was commissioned by Transmission Gallery Glasgow and was printed in an edition of 500. It makes use of quotations from Franz Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks* and Heiner Müller's stage adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Fatzer-Fragments*.

⁵ At present the Faculty of Invisibility is constituted by Paul Gangloff, Sönke Hallmann and Inga Zimprich

⁶ www.un.org/webcast

⁷ <http://www.un.org/ga/64/generaldebate/LY.shtml>

greatest conflicts are at issue and subject of negotiation, still the last act of expression seems to be drawn from the faces and voices of the delegates.⁸ Possibly taken into those proceedings, which were developed to accommodate them.

„And yet they are attentive observers...“ (...) They look like (...) messengers who do not know the content of the letters they must deliver (...) but (...) whose very posture *seems like a message*.“

„Someone, it’s not clear who, has assigned them to us, and it isn’t easy to get “rid of them.“⁹

The “tired mode of language” employed by the UN, as Ariane Müller pointed out¹⁰, “a language at the end of its poetic means”, may show a similarity with the highest officials in Franz Kafka’s castle who suffer from constant fatigue:

„None of these figures has a firm place in the world, or firm, inalienable outlines. There is not one that is not either rising or falling, none that is not trading its qualities with its enemy or neighbor; (...) none that is not deeply exhausted and yet is only at the beginning“ of a long duration.¹¹

If the UN is a place where language works along the lines of its own exhaustion, if it stands as an emblem for an instance that is held in place through a ceaseless activity in language, it possibly ought to be the place for the Faculty of Invisibility to found itself anew¹². So that we will have to respond to a series of questions inscribed to such a place in language: how does one invite another to take a seat at the table? What does it mean, as an observer, to lend one’s voice to an event? How does one as a representative speak on behalf of another? Is the moment of translation not that in which the interpreter decides on the meaning of the message he has to convey? What are the rules of proceedings we could possibly act in accordance with? And what could it mean to remain, as an institution, really without an *œuvre*?

⁸ <http://webcast.un.org/ramgen/ondemand/sc/2009/sc090827am.rm>

⁹ Giorgio Agamben: *The Assistants*. In: *Profanations*, Zone Books, 2007. Quoting (italic): Walter Benjamin, „Franz Kafka“, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2 1927 – 1934, p.799.

¹⁰ http://dictionaryofwar.org/concepts/United_Nations

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben: *The Assistants*. In: *Profanations*, Zone Books, 2007. Quoting (italic): Walter Benjamin, „Franz Kafka“, *Selected Writings*, Volume 2 1927 – 1934, p.799.

¹² In the production *The United Nations – On the performative institution* in 2010 the Faculty of Invisibility cooperates with Shedhalle Zürich, Transmission Gallery Glasgow, Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen Innsbruck, and Flutgraben e.V. Berlin.