

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: HANNAH BLACK

Hannah Black

Some Context

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Ellen Greig: Your exhibition Some Context is structured around 20,000 copies of The Situation, a book made up of conversations between yourself and friends about 'the situation'. Could you talk about the process of making the book and why you decided to invite these friends to talk about 'the situation'?

Hannah Black: It was partly responding to an ambient sense that we are living in a more pressing situation than usual; a situation that is hard to articulate both in terms of conventional categories of political analysis but also in terms of temporality. The idea that there is – in this post Brexit, post Trump era, and also in the era of increasing environmental catastrophe – a new and very tangible global situation that we all share. A shared condition that is both something that is emergent, which is happening now, and new. It has also opened out – in the traditional sense of ‘the apocalyptic is revelation’ – a new understanding of capitalist time as being also consistent and homogeneous, having constantly replayed the same kind of systems of domination for quite a long time. So it is this curious kind of fabric of what I am calling ‘the situation’ which is the idea that is both very new and very old – or its newness and oldness are kind of folded together – and that conventional ways of thinking and analysing things might not apply to it in the way they used to. In a way we are in a situation, a pressing situation, but this is also not new, and there is this kind of both new and old response to this both new and old situation.

On the other hand, this is my fourth-major show this year, including the performance at MoMA PS1, so I was also asking myself “What is a production process that I can actually give myself to?” I am not someone who works in a craft-based way. In fact, that has been something I have struggled with and I have had to come to some sort of accommodation with. In some weird, either romantic or modernist or whatever kind of way, I think I am still attached to this idea of the artist as an expert maker, which I am not by any means an expert maker. The transformational moment in my art education was during my foundation (which I did quite late in my mid twenties) when a teacher said “but mess is also an aesthetic”. I think the way that I have managed to enter into any kind of relation to making is through mess.

I was trying to think of what an emotionally authentic way of making would be – meaning not in the ontological sense of authentic, but authentic to feelings. What I spend most time doing is hanging out and talking to friends so I decided that that should be the production process. Initially, I had some idea that I was going to reach out and contact people who are particularly expert in discussing a given situation and then at some point I decided that it would just be people that I was spending time with. So for the most part everyone who appears in the book is a transcribed conversation with someone I was spending time with anyway and at some point I was like “do you mind doing a couple of hours of just talking?”.

EG: *What situations did you and your friends end up discussing?*

I initially thought that I could start by asking extremely generic questions, like “How is the situation?” or “Do you perceive there to be a situation? And if so, what is it?” or that kind of thing. From which – probably also because of the kind of people I hang out with – they instantly abstract some sort of global, historical question and there is only so many of those conversations you can have. At a certain point I started to ask people to pick a situation they would like to talk about. These range from someone who had just done an event the day before that had not gone how they had hoped and they wanted to talk about it, to someone talking about a sexual assault, to someone talking about a dynamic between a group of friends. For me it is somewhat – and this is one of those maybe poorly understood theoretical ideas that I have just held onto or whatever – connected to what I understand of Peter Osborne’s critique of the concept of the contemporary, which is a kind of impossible perspective or

impossible position, because in order to fully encompass the global situation or the contemporary you would have to be viewing it from every possible position.

EG: Yes, conversations move between personal accounts of a situation and broader political positions relating to a situation. Was it your intention to conduct the conversations like this?

HB: I was ecstatic when people wanted to bring personal things into the conversation, and it was kind of unexpected who would and wouldn't. There were people that I absolutely thought would only want to talk about something hardcore political and actually wanted to talk about something very personal, and the other way round. And of course everything becomes both, kind of. I am interested in those different kinds of scales. There is a quote that is unfortunately by Slavoj Žižek – who is obviously a terrible person and I just remembered it because I thought it was by somebody else and then I went to check it and I was like, “shit, it was Žižek”. But anyway, it is something about the ‘I’ as the site of this impossible articulation between the historical and the particular. In a way that is what the conversations are about.

In this sense, I think the content of *The Situation* is intimate rather than voyeuristic. I actually tried to deflect the possibility of a direct voyeuristic relation to the content through blurring the authorial voice, for example. Of course if you know someone you can probably tell who is who, but if you don't you really can't. I've even blurred my voice and the speaking persons' voice together so that there are paragraphs where maybe even each alternate sentence is by somebody else.

EG: You have also censored the conversations as well. Why have you chosen to do this?

HB: Initially I was hoping that the only form of editing would be censorship but it felt a bit weird to have pages and pages of just blacked-out text. There were parts of the transcripts that were incomprehensible so there was a certain amount of editing that was needed. In the end it is a kind of hybrid between editing and censorship, with the primary editorial method being censorship. But inevitably I started censoring things such as typos or the word ‘like’. Censoring was also a way of injecting a kind of privacy into what could otherwise seem like a self-exposing gesture. I am weirdly uninterested in the right to privacy; it doesn't excite me politically because it seems very ‘boojie’ as a concept. I am more interested in the sense of what you choose to share or not share.

In a way I feel like people are always already in the social –in the way the private comes after the social; like the private secret individual comes after the social so it is not like it is this existing natural category that has to be upheld. However, once you are out in the social sometimes you want to cover yourself or something. I think also the censorship – and the various strategies of veiling that I already mentioned that I use in the book – also expresses and reflects my own ambivalence towards being in public.

In my birth chart my North node, which is supposed to be your overall life purpose or what you are promised in this life and is based on the reincarnation model, is in cancer, but in the eighth house. Having a north node as eighth house Cancer basically means vulnerability in public. I have a huge amount of ambivalence about publicness. In the books the censorship and the blurring of the authorial voices is aimed towards an expression of some sort of ambivalence. When I talk about ambivalence I don't mean it as either one or the other, I mean a specific condition of life. I guess there is a negative sense of ambivalence because it can be very painful –ambivalence is painful– but it is also what we live in so it also opens out the idea of a kind of condition where contradictions can be contained. Even the idea of a contradiction is a perspective trick. When I find the people I am close to contradictory I try and think that there must be some way that it is actually not a contradiction, that they must on some level make sense, that they must make sense together because they do exist in the same person. There is no objective measure of whether or not you can both be incredibly attention seeking and incredibly introverted for example. Presumably there is some mechanism that would actually make that not contradictory to the people themselves. So I guess that is the promise of ambivalence.

EG: You have made a series of soft objects – in the shape of teddy bears – in various sizes and forms, and positioned these throughout the gallery space. You have shredded copies of The Situation and filled these objects with fragmented elements of these books. Can you talk about this process?

HB: Essentially there are the books, which are about ‘the situation’. Some of these books have been shredded and have metamorphosed into these soft objects titled, *Transitional Objects*. The phrase itself –transitional object– is a pretty conventional psychoanalytic term and it mainly has to do with something that is quite common in small children. I am not sure in what specific developmental stages it takes place, but it is usually around the time that you are individuating and learning that you are distinct from other people. It refers to a time when you start to understand yourself as an individual in a world full of other individuals; this kind of early learning that we have to do in relation to other people. At this stage it is common for children to become attached to a particular object, such as a blanket, or my sister had a soft toy cat called Angel that she still has. The term refers to objects that somehow mediate either what you think of as a gap between different concepts of yourself, or self and other. There is a really nice phrase in that psychoanalyst D.W Winnicott essay that I was reading about it.

EG: Did D.W Winnicott coin the term, ‘transitional objects’?

HB: Yes, he wrote an essay in the early 1950s about this practice where children would become fixated on a particular object. Winnicott refers to this as an act that mediates between an uncomfortable amount of certain indebtedness and the acceptance of indebtedness. I really like this idea because obviously debt is an important figure in, for example, Fred Moten’s work that I feel everyone has been finding so inspiring recently – the idea of some mutual interdependence or indebtedness and all the ways that are kind of mutual obligations or obligations to other people can be something that causes pain, or difficulty, or fails, or has to be repaired.

I was interested in the idea of the transitional object in relation to the transformation of ‘the situation’. This idea that we are all full of the situation and of these various thoughts about the situation, (obviously not only the ones expressed in the book but I think that the proliferation of perspectives in the book represent an infinite proliferation of possible takes). My friends tend to have a similar kind of politics so you get what you pay for, but a potentially endless proliferation of thoughts, feelings and observations about any number of situations that are both shared and not shared, some not shared but relatable, some shared but you don’t relate to... I mean there are so many different permutations of that. The *Transitional Objects* are filled with *The Situation* in different ways, in different capacities.

EG: Winnicott describes the transitional object as embodying both an ‘acceptance of difference and familiarity’, which I think is interesting in relation to what you were saying earlier about contradiction. The objects are both cute as well as slightly sinister.

HB: Yes, I wish I could remember more of this one thing that Roxanna Gay wrote about cuteness. There is some kind of limit condition thing in cuteness but I can’t remember what she says about it. The teddies are almost hyper evocative in a way that is actually a bit out of control.

EG: You said the other day that the Transitional Objects are a bit ‘emo’.

HB: Some of the things that I was trying out in the space early on were ridiculous; they could have been emo album covers or whatever. A teddy bear can signify so intensely. Really tiny gestures somehow produce these loud effects and I think – not that I am particularly formally driven – but it is something that I find interesting in formal practices is this idea that you take something really intense but then you try and control it.

I feel I have mentioned this in a bunch of things before but there was this very random French landscape painting that I happened to see in very random circumstances a few years ago that was called *The Blue Door*. The painting has a bright red bush in the foreground. I don’t even remember if it was actually a good painting, but I was just really impressed –this is when I was like 25 or something– by the idea that you would use a central, really strong colour such as red in the work, but

you would call the painting *The Blue Door* and the painting would still convincingly be of a blue door. So maybe it is a little bit like that with the teddies; you can use a teddy but try and have them not only be teddies, even though that is what they obviously are.

The series of *Transitional Objects* don't have features. Some of them are very classic teddies and then others are weird shapes. In a way they are kind of funny objects. Subjectivity is always a kind of contract or deal, but in this case it is only one way. Despite being full of *The Situation*, maybe these objects can't offer recognition in return. It is so easy to give them personhood and we so readily give the teddies some kind of character, it is almost too easy. I had originally imagined that they would be somehow more dramatic in their positioning but I think to an extent they are just there and they already start to do all the weird things like, "oh that one is sad" or "this one is comforting".

EG: *You have installed standard paper shredders – the type you find in offices – in the space. Some of the shredders have been marked with figures. Where have you sourced this imagery?*

HB: Yes there are two shredders, *Ancient Alien Shredders 1-2* that are marked with drawings. These works reference the unusual failing of a white archeology that has been unable to perceive technologically complex or artistically complex cultural objects from places like Australia or Africa as being actually made by the people who live there, so rather they ascribe them to aliens. The drawings that are scratched on the shredders are sourced from blogs where people discuss conspiracy theories about how these kind of cave paintings were in fact made by aliens who came down to share their wisdom with the people or whatever, and of course this is not true. These images are just figures of people as drawn by the people who lived there. What I find interesting is that it is so inconceivable that they were drawn by actual people who weren't from Western Europe that they need these very elaborate theories like "this is actually an astronaut's suit that he is wearing and you can even see the seams" and bullshit like that.

This aspect of the exhibition relates to the fantasy of something external to the situation. For example, why would somebody imagine that the figure is an alien when it is just the figure of a person or an imaginary figure? Why would a European archeologist – or whoever is archiving this stuff – be so determined to read it in that way? It would in a way reveal something painfully true about the situation of colonisation or the situation of European supremacy, which there is no reason for it.

EG: *The shredders in the space also indicate, and are the mechanism for the shredding of The Situation. When the exhibition closes in December you plan to shred the remaining books and make new soft objects out of them. Why do you want to do this?*

HB: The shredders are in the space and ready for action, so in theory if an audience member wants to shred a book they are available for use. If a visitor did want to shred a book they would have to tear it apart into small pieces because they are just office shredders and they get blocked quite easily. Obviously, I do have the other part of what I do where I have published two actual books; one was an element of the show at mumok, Vienna (*Life*, 2017, with Juliana Huxtable) and the other was just a book that I did (*Dark Pool Party*, 2016). But these books here are not being offered as my new book or like another book, they are objects whose existence is limited to the installation.

Therefore, the remaining books will all be shredded at the end of the exhibition and the paper will be used as the stuffing for more *Transitional Objects*. If an audience member wants to take a book, then that one would obviously not be shredded, so technically any books that happen to go missing will survive in some kind of parallel archive. I think the idea that visitors can take a book should be like the EasyJet policy. You know when you take a bag under your coat they just pretend that you don't have it, even though there is obviously a bag under your coat? For example, if somebody starts walking out of the gallery with stacks of books maybe it would be good for the front of house person to be like "wow, these are very important artworks". However, if someone were to smuggle one past the very rigorous gallery staff, then the book would become something that is put on your bookshelf. It will survive the exhibition. It is similar to the conversation I did with friends – yes, I happened to record them, but we have conversations all the time about the situation that are not archived or documented, which in some abstract level, do add up to the situation that we are all sharing.

The Situation, and the *Transitional Objects* are made of, and manage the situation –they are the result of, and the caretakers of, the situation. Because the *Transitional Objects* are so weirdly relatable little things that they tap into this idea that we all have our different ways of dealing with whatever we perceive to be the situation that we are in.

EG: *We've previously discussed the exhibition as a 'digestive apparatuses'. Can you expand on this idea?*

HB: The exhibition addresses how 'the situation' becomes subjectivated as transitional objects. It is also a blurry idea of where the subjectivity is but they become subjectivated as these transitional objects that then, I imagine – and this is the imaginary part – themselves could get together and talk about the situation, record it and produce their own books that could then be destroyed in order to make a new thing. We have previously talked about the idea of ephemera vs. ephemerality; as in the ephemerality that then becomes ephemera and is given to the archive and then an actual ephemerality, which is that things pass in the sense that they become something else. The destructive and productive processes that take place cannot be clearly distinguished.

There is this feeling at the moment that literally all analytic categories have just collapsed; all become so self-evident that there is just no point saying them anymore. I watched the movie *Arrival* on the plane here and then I was tweeting about it because I was jet lagged and I was like "here is my theory on *Arrival*". You are watching it and you are like, "oh it is kind of about colonisation" and then somebody in the film literally says "they are like a primitive race –they will treat us like a primitive race; they have to destroy you". Oh I guess they were going to tell me that.

There is no point –the content has become too manifest. It was once like, "American presidents are like patriarchal and white supremacists" and blah, blah, blah and now it is like "Hi, I am patriarchal and white supremacist. Please vote for me! I love it!" The idea that it is a kind of an arcane critical position to say that capitalism isn't working but now everyone just thinks, "yeah whatever it doesn't really work but nobody can think of anything else". I don't know what critique that is. So I feel like it is just like "lets hang out and talk until we can work it out".

EG: *You have also made some small modeling clay sculptures that are installed throughout the exhibition space. Can you talk about the clay sculptures?*

In my Bodega Gallery exhibition, *Soc or Barb* (2017) the clay was supposed to stand for some sort of infinite malleability of the human. At this point in my life I got into watching monkey and primate documentaries. I found it really inspiring because what we share most – maybe not only specific to primates, but specially pronounced in primates and monkeys – is being really adaptable. So for some groups of baboons they have very intense patriarchal social structures. However, if the food supply changes suddenly the social structure moves to a matriarchy. This represents a malleability of the social, not of the individual. In a way within the social the individual doesn't have that many options, we are a bit constrained by who is around us, but the social as a whole is something very malleable and that is a kind of promise.

Perhaps it is that literally this *is* the condition. That people can think of new ways of being together and living together and some people will think "those people are terrible" but other people will think "they are great" and so on. Some people think that extremely disciplined fascism would be a wonderful social structure and they are really into that. And yes that is conceivable, people can live like that, they do live like that, and they don't just lie down and die. People adapt and invent new ways of still feeling ok in horrific situations.

The modeling clay stands for this kind of principle, but not actualisation, of malleability or change or transformation, or potential for transformation rather than its actual happening. So I think here they act as a supporting role because in a way the feedback loop between the soft objects and the book is kind of tight. Maybe the soft objects need to be reminded that there is life outside the situation. But I hope it is also a little ambiguous as to whether the modeling clay creatures are actually helping or sabotaging.

This thing came up in the Arcadia Missa install that I did in 2015 for my show *Not You*. I made these big brown paintings with scratches on them and at some point someone said “they are cute and hostile” and I said, “I am cute and hostile”. I hope that what is happening in the show here is that teddies, the shredders, the books and everything else, is within the cute and hostile aesthetic. It is kind of a plea for those two things to be taken as one, or something.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Thursday 14 August 2017. Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.

A note from Hannah Black: “Ironically, considering I spent the summer reading transcripts of myself and others speaking, I can't bring myself to re-read this interview. I remember feeling sincere as I spoke, so probably this is what I meant at the time, even if I don't trust that version of myself any more. I hope it is OK.”