

Exchange Values: Images of Invisible Lives

Opening talk

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We are standing in an art gallery, participating in a process whose contours are familiar to many of us, almost ritualised, in fact: "the opening of an exhibition". The invitation to the opening of Exchange Values. Images of invisible lives is careful not to use this terminology - it refers rather to the opening of a "social sculpture" project - but to us as we stand here, the way Shelley Sacks characterises her work seems less determining of what is happening than the fact that we're in this gallery environment, waiting for the speeches to be over so that we can look at works displayed on the walls, exhibited for us.

The invitation itself doesn't give away too much about what it is that we will see on the walls - if I had not already talked to Shelley, or read the catalogue of the project, I'm not sure that I would have identified the delicate curved shapes on the front of the invitation as banana skins; and I certainly would have no idea of what the numbers meant. Even knowing this, it takes some imaginative work to make sense of the idea of filling an art space with bananas. I've been mentioning to people over the past few weeks that I was going to attend "an exhibition of banana skins" at the National Gallery, and without exception the reaction has been one of laughter - easily explicable laughter, because after all the banana skin is the stuff of some of the silliest, most innocent jokes that Western civilization has to offer; and the banana itself does duty often enough in a repertoire of rather less innocent jokes. The disjunction between the associations that a banana skin triggers in our minds, and the meaning that we ascribe to an art exhibition, was very obvious in this laughter. I wondered whether the same reaction would have come from the idea of "an exhibition of apples", for example. Perhaps that idea would immediately send us off in search of associations with good and evil, serpents, forbidden knowledge, and a host of other metaphors buried in that particular fruit.

So we come towards these banana skins with our own understanding of them. Not only jokes; bananas are, for us in South Africa, an easily available fruit, not associated with any particular season, usually cheaper than most other fruits in the supermarket. A comfort food, a nursery food, the sort of item we would pass by in our search for the exotic or the significant, but return to gratefully as a safe standby.

If this opening were now taking place in what was formerly East Germany, a whole other set of associations might come with us to this opening. I remember being astonished to see, in Berlin in November 1989, the first East Germans entering West Berlin being given bananas as a symbol of their new freedom. Bananas were, for them, an embodiment of all the consumer delights of capitalism that had been denied them for so long - a kind of metonymy of the tropical paradise that Gauguin, then Club Med, then Kaufhaus des Westens promised to all those wanting to escape their dreary northern lives.

Context produces meaning. We've brought with us to this opening at least part of the meaning we expect to find, looking at the installation.

When I tried to explain to my laughing friends why there might be some serious meaning in a sheet of banana skins hanging on a wall, I found myself referring to a second set of associations, ideas, issues, equally familiar: the campaign for fair trade spreading slowly within consumer societies, the processes of globalisation that govern world trade today, the exploitation of small-scale independent farmers by multinationals, the fact that once again we have an example of the centuries-old phenomenon of people and environments in the southern hemisphere being exploited and damaged by powerful forces in the northern hemisphere. These processes remain painfully active in the lives of many South Africans. Is the point of Exchange Values, then, to remind us of socio-economic forces at work around us? Do we need this reminder? Standing in front of the banana skins, listening to the voices of the farmers who produced them, are we meant to decide to join a local pressure group, or boycott bananas with Unifruco stickers on them?

These questions led me to a different kind of question. Is this social sculpture project doing anything that a pamphlet, a documentary film, or any other educational campaign by fair trade activists is not doing? What does it offer me? What does it expect from me?

The first response to these questions must be that this is, whatever its other dimensions, an aesthetic experience: I am asked to look, to listen, I will want to touch (though of course I won't, because of the rules of art galleries), I will stand still and let my senses be stimulated, my perceptions re-arranged. Something will

happen that I can't predict - maybe the smallest heightening of attention, maybe memories triggered, or associations awoken. Connections will happen: standing still, letting myself be touched by what I see and hear, I will in some way complete a circuit of meaning that is invisible outside myself. The invisible lives talking to me through these skins and voices will now include my own life. In this quiet gallery space, the clearly demarcated boundaries between me and the art works around me begin to dissolve - I become part of the social sculpture - it requires my presence to continue itself.

The social sculpture process that has brought these skins and voices into the National Gallery has involved many such stages of connection - you will be able to read about them in the catalogue. You may already be imagining what they might have been, just thinking about the logistics of getting all these skins, emptying them of their fruit, stitching them, finding their growers, packing them, unpacking them ... At each stage of this process transformative work has happened, inside and between people exchanging ideas, labour, materials, values.

The form of the project has been designed to bring about connections of self and world; one can think of this form as a kind of choreography in which certain kinds of behaviour are made possible, or made necessary, for all of us who connect with it. By hanging sheets of skin on a wall, Shelley requires us to stand still, to look, to wait for meaning to arise as we look. By offering us recorded voices of farmers, but not their images, she allows us to let their voices resonate in our bodies, but at the same time forces us to fill the gap left by the absence of their images with our own imagined versions of them. By framing a consumer item, an item of exchange, that inhabits our daily lives almost invisibly, she reminds us of the deep connections we have with lives and labour and economic forces and organic processes in ever-widening circles around us, just by participating in the ordinary business of our days. This sense of connection is the first step in doing what the banana farmers' story tells us has to be done: taking hold of the world, and changing it.

This collection of banana skins and voices, and all the imaginative work that went into producing it, is a model of a process which can be enacted over and over, in all the different contexts and modalities in which we live as individuals, in a world we make and re-make constantly in conscious and unconscious ways. If, as Jeremy Cronin has said, "art is the struggle to stay awake", Shelley Sacks' social sculpture opens a space for us and inside us in which we can wake up and, in her words, "explore and engage with everything in our lives". That is perhaps the real opening that we are attending here, today.