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INTERVIEW: A Constructed World on An Artwork You Can't Talk About



Courtesy Spring Workshop

Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva of A Constructed World.

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There's a mysterious temporary room at Spring Workshop. Inside the room, there is an art installation, but anyone who is allowed in to see it must first sign a legally-binding confidentiality contract to not speak about or photograph the work until it is dismantled.

Installation of "The Social Contract."

How does this ban on discussion affect the audience of an art work? And how does it heighten the participatory nature of an art audience? These are the questions at the center of the work “The Social Contract” created by Australian artists Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva, produce art under the project name “A Constructed World.” Their installation at Spring is the latest installment of the year-long “Moderation(s),” a collaboration between Spring and Rotterdam’s center for contemporary art Witte de With. Read more about the project [here](#).

BLOUIN ARTINFO chats with Lowe and Riva on the consequences of breaking the contract and the “unreasonable” pressure of being the audience of artwork.

Does it even matter what's inside your space? Or is the contract itself the art?

Geoff Lowe: Well, we've done this show four times now and it's been a completely different content each time and we thought a lot about the content. We want to offer you something that's worth holding onto. People were expecting that because of the idea that you can't speak about it, that it's going to be something controversial. We were more about expanding the repertoire of the viewer. There's an unreasonable pressure on the viewer to know what they think. This is why a lot of people say they don't know about or they're not interested in art.

Roger Ouk is the lawyer for this exhibition. How has working with a lawyer affected the show?

Jacqueline Riva: The experience with Roger has made us think about it a lot more than in the past. The thing about this contract is that it is a participatory contract. It makes a more creative audience. They are participating in something. The work for us is the contract. The people decide, to sign or not to sign the contract. And then they agree to the terms of the contract with us. In fact, the work is made by the people who sign the contract and walk into the room.

The audience doesn't realize their own production in a work of art. It's something that they go to a gallery to look at, they're not really aware that they are the audience and that the work is there for them. Hopefully this draws attention to the fact that they are part of the production that they are in a way the producers after the artist has made the work. They produce something in their consuming the work.

What is the actual consequence of breaking the contract?

Riva: To make the contract and sign it, it a legal document its been written by a lawyer, so there's obviously some kind of legal consequence of doing that.

Lowe: You really are breaking your word. It's not so much like going into a museum and photographing when they say don't photograph. Here you've agreed not to do those things and not to speak as a participant of the work, rather than forcing people to do something.

Riva: Some people choose not to sign the contract. Some people have said they didn't think they could keep it the promise so they didn't want to sign it. Others are anxious about providing personal information.

Lowe: This make another part of the work. If half the people decide not to sign the contract then that would be something new. When I was younger I used to be terrible at keeping secrets. I would have had to think carefully about doing signing the contract.

It seems many of us have a difficulty keeping things to ourselves these days, what with everyone oversharing on social media.

Riva: We live in an age where everybody blurts everything. There's nothing that's not really revealed anymore. Can we participate in something and then hold it to ourselves? Maybe it's just the evolution of social media, but we are really tied up in an outward-facing culture that's kind of weird but necessary for some reason now.

Lowe: Rather than make a war on selfies and Facebook, we're just trying to explore what the alternative might be, to see what the experience of not speaking or not opening up could be. The audience can explore their own diffuseness.

And after five weeks then they can speak about it?

Riva: At the end of the show, yes. I wonder if people will have anything to say then. Whether they will still have the desire to speak.

Lowe: Maybe they will forget about it. Maybe they will forget to remember.

Riva: A friend who has seen the show said they hadn't divulged the information even to their partner who had seen the show.

Lowe: It was such a vivid image this middle-aged couple in bed not telling each other. Even in a relationship like that they had this desire to have private thoughts, as a pleasurable thing.