

**WE ARE
ARTISTS**

Group Work

Brown Council

1 - 17 December 2011

In his essay 'A Note Upon The Mystic Writing-Pad', psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud describes memory as unstable and evolving, subject to distortion and vulnerable to subconsciously shifting notions of value. To articulate the process of how memory-traces are registered in the mind, Freud uses the example of a child's erasable writing tablet. He suggests the appearance and disappearance of writing on its surface – and the more subtle but enduring registration of marks on the support beneath – emulate the 'flickering-up and passing away of consciousnesses' in relation to memory and perception. Brown Council's *Group Work* bears a striking (though inadvertent) relationship to the analogy described in Freud's text, reframing the properties and gestures associated with the erasable writing tablet in the context of a performance installation.

For *Group Work*, the artists conduct a private three-part performance in the gallery space prior to the opening of the exhibition. In the company only of each other, they recall momentous events and influential people in their lives. Each part of the performance correlates to a specific subject: people they have loved or who they have slept with, and significant deaths. As each name is spontaneously spoken out loud, it is recorded in chalk on a blackboard then immediately rubbed out to make way for the next – a process of revelation and effacement that continues until the group's related memories have been exhaustively recorded.

Like the artists' recent works *Portrait of Brown Council by Brown Council* and *Work in Progress: Dawn to Dusk*, both 2010, *Group Work* reflects, in part, on their collaborative process. At a fundamental level, the structure of the project addresses how collective labour relates to shared authorship. Moreover, *Group Work* probes the genuine possibility of constructing a singular, cohesive group identity in which individualism is subsumed within a unified narrative.

There is a particular tension at play between the form of *Group Work* and the experiences invoked. The procedural nature of the cataloguing process undermines the specificity of each recollection. There is no allowance for meaning to be elaborated or context described; one after another, memories are systematically enunciated, recorded then smeared away. In this regard, the project amplifies the discord between the cool gesture of the written word and the original experience as something emphatically registered on the body through affect and exertion – a kind of unique imprint, impossible to transfer or translate in all its complexity.

By working within the constraints of a rigid system of expression that eschews sentiment or nostalgia, the artists also create a superficial equivalency between memories that are undoubtedly of varying significance to their authors. By its very nature, however, memory works against this logic of uniformity. All memories are not equal. This is subtly underscored in *Group Work* by the fact that, although the artists perform in good faith, inevitably certain people and experiences will be omitted from their lists. Such is the provisional condition of memory: over time the residual 'mark' of certain events fades to the degree these can no longer be readily called to mind.

Archives are the instrument used to counter this process of unconscious erasure. The material traces they gather and preserve are a reference point for establishing or sustaining accounts of the past. Far from being purely retrospective, however, archives are ultimately produced with the future in mind. They anticipate forgetting and work speculatively to circumvent disappearance. Through the act of remembering and recording history, *Group Work* addresses the archival impulse. The series of *aide-mémoires* it accumulates reflects the function of the archive as a form of testimony. But in the continual elision of each inscription, the work underscores the inexorable pressure of time on memory. The breach between memory and history, and between events and their residues, is brought into focus.

Anneke Jaspers 2011