

# Hydra, the Chicken and the Egg

by Hinrich Sachs

translation from German by Judith Rosenthal

A couple of letters typed on the keyboard and a few clicks of the mouse suffice to locate the 'artists' firm' Goldin+Senneby in Stockholm, Sweden. Their work, however, has little in common with the documentary narratives or social and communal contexts that characterize many of the artistic concepts which emerged in Scandinavia and gained international recognition in the 1990s. Their Internet-based business card points to activities in the areas of judicial, economic and spatial constructs. 'To construe', was a core artistic term of the 1920s, a time when architects, artists and intellectuals sought to influence the circumstances of living conditions and political schemes by means of work with forms. Nevertheless, here, on the level of form, everything speaks in favour of a firm. A typical consultancy or, more specifically, typical of what until recently we considered normal.

A party had been organized in a real-time online world, and in the course of the avatar evening I made a number of new acquaintances by way of the chat mode. Half a year later, in conjunction with a business trip to Stockholm, we arranged to get together in so-called real life. A quick after-work drink with the two artists in the hotel bar turned into a conversation about cannibalism and lifetime. Now and then we organize parties together.

I had the opportunity to witness close-up their involved search for the physical site pictured in a photograph of a luscious, green and hilly landscape under a blue sky with a few white clouds that an unknown photographer had sold as a generic computer screensaver. It is an image that has been hammered into our collective consciousness as the operating system's desktop background on millions of computers worldwide. Goldin+Senneby found both the location and the photographer.

What occasioned this essay, however, is Goldin+Senneby's ongoing narrative project *Headless*. *Headless* is not a party. Work on it has been in progress since 2006. Goldin+Senneby like to refer to the philosopher Georges Bataille with his affinity to artists and his (discursive) predilection for transgression and delusion. But in the logic of genres, *Headless* invites classification as a detective story; more precisely, an information technology detective story. It is all about what the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin referred to as speech genres, identified by him as follows: "in addition to the forms of language there are also forms of combinations of these forms."<sup>1</sup> A solo exhibition, a film, a lecture in North America: the work has been presented in all of these forms and, as an occasional reader of detective stories, I begin to look for clues.

*We don't have a language for this. The body. The corpus. A body of information, to constitute something, a company has a legal persona, is a person in its own right. Cloning bodies, as vehicles, to do things.<sup>2</sup>*

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds.), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986; 9th paperback edition, 2004, p.98.

2. K.D., *Looking for Headless*, Sao Paolo, 2008, p.60

What is *Headless*? What does *Headless* consist of? Over the past two years the project has evidently brought about a wide range of voices, texts, embodiments and public elements. It has become public in Stockholm, Oslo, Istanbul, Bergamo, Vitoria-Gasteiz, São Paolo, Toronto and London. In all of these places it has been looked at, listened to, read, combined, interpreted and recombined. Various materializations and textual details – referring to one another as well as to a "someplace else" – form a loose fabric that I will here call the 'fabric of credibility'. Journalists, eyewitnesses, experts, artists, writers and actors show and tell. Their powerful story gradually takes shape: it is the story of the fiction of money and of money's extraordinary ability to create reality, the story of how global electronic markets make power out of placelessness, and how, as participants, people and bodies are made docile. The more I immerse myself in this show, the more tangible it becomes. I myself contribute material to it, both as an exhibition visitor and as a daily user of credit cards.

Let us consider a tendency which is conspicuous in the Western world, and which is triggered by fear: the tendency towards a need for "cultural reassurance", which in recent years has often set its sights on documents from the past and used them as a point of departure for artistic reflection and production (while also – as re-enactments or documentary

narratives – having a certain mollifying effect). *Headless* counters this tendency with a critical, explorative eye to the present situation. In other words: to the present day action routines, to present day production conditions (of art, as well), to present day value creation, logistics and representation.

Several possibilities are now raised in a short time: that *Headless Ltd.* is something Goldin+Senneby have set up, that Barlow is not in the Bahamas at all, that *Headless* might not exist. The people around the table, however, don't seem to view any of these possibilities as worrying. Instead, they are discussing art, economy and secrecy.<sup>3</sup>

3. K.D., *Looking for Headless*, Sao Paolo, 2008, p.61

*Headless* must be viewed against the background of Hans Haacke's *shapolsky et al.*, *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* and other works by this artist. They introduce the exposure of economic circumstances – or, more specifically, the relationship between speculative profits and cultural subsidization – to art. Naturally, times have changed since Haacke produced his works. Institutions no longer create scandals with their cancellations; on the contrary, institutions in the biennial exhibition sector have repeatedly invited Goldin+Senneby to continue the work. Is this state of affairs to be explained by the fact that, on the part of the institutions, nobody really knows exactly how and what *Headless* is looking for, or what will be on view in the exhibition? Or by the fact that those institutions meanwhile take an indifferent stance toward the content of art, since the latter has become meaningless as compared to the speculation-generating commodities of art?

Recent events cast a different light on this perspective. The bank crash and the slump in the stock and real estate markets in the second half of 2008 burst a bubble whose illusionary inflation all kinds of people suddenly claim to have sensed for quite some time. The German film critic Martina Knoblen points out that the movie industry ultimately reacts to such moods, leading to the marketing of films that manifest this uneasiness with fiction. Traditional story-tellers in the feature film genre – a genre usually so carefree in its operation – now distrust their own inventive powers, whereas the documentary is booming.<sup>4</sup> Is this symptom of the above-mentioned cultural reassurance? The search for *Headless* got under way long before the crisis began.

4. Martina Knoblen, 'Vom Unbehagen in der Fiktion', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 January 2009, p.11.

Again: *Headless* is not a party, nor is it a documentary or detective story based on a moral conception of good and evil, but rather *Headless* orchestrates a wide range of voices, texts and exhibition situations. In overlappings and parallels, these genres sketch the search for the offshore company in its real live dimension. Both metaphorically and concretely, the utilization of information technology, outsourcing and delegation plays a central role in this form of artistic work. This is no consultancy. What is at work here are 'author chains'.

It should be noted that ... the history of literature also includes conventional and semiconventional forms of address to readers, listeners, posterity, and so forth, just as, in addition to the actual author, there are also ... images of substitute authors, editors, and various kinds of narrators. The vast majority of literary genres are secondary, complex genres composed of various transformed primary genres (the rejoinder in dialogue, everyday stories, letters, diaries, minutes, and so forth). As a rule, these secondary genres of complex cultural communication play out various forms of primary speech communication.<sup>5</sup>

Place. Various locations in Stockholm. All the scene settings (prologue, scene 1–4) have been borrowed, sometimes slightly modified, from the text *Indoor Language* by artist Hinrich Sachs and curator Barnaby Drabble. *Indoor language* refers to the informal professional language, the language used behind the scenes but never or very seldom revealed in public or to an audience.<sup>6</sup>

5. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p.98.

6. Kim Einarsson, 'Nameless Acting', *Gelst*, 2007–08, No. 11, 12, 14, p.105.

Goldin+Senneby produce feedback loops artistically. Places, documents, stories, and even the economic conditions of their work take on a discursive quality. As rhetorical aspects of the speaking act and the speech genre, proximity and distance, overlapping and acquisition, fiction and recording target a specific aesthetic dimension: that of non-intentionality. And in this aesthetic strategy of distributing responsibility in such a way that intentions become invisible, the mind map of present day management culture is reflected. It is only in the latter's structural means of disclaiming responsibility that the taboo of exposing the mechanisms of money (as a self-generating medium) to the public is doubly violated.

It is in this context that Bataille's early preoccupation with transgression and delusion, after being developed further and reformulated in the 1970s by Michel Foucault, now appears so relevant to the present: "... sovereign power had the right to decide life and death. ... In contemporary societies ... this symbolic right subsisted, but only in a 'relative and limited' form. The mechanisms of power had dramatically changed. Instead of destroying life, they were managing it in all sorts of ways."<sup>7</sup>

On the level of the meaning conveyed by those multifarious voices, texts and exhibition situations, *Headless* succeeds in evading the security of representational form so desired by institutions and the public. Instead, the interested party is lured into the reality of unclarified circumstances. The elements of recognition and understanding are staggered by means of a real-time axis as well as a chain of places located at a geographical distance to one another. The generation of meaning thus active in the projections and interpretations that constitute the work's reception speaks of the relationship of art to our current living conditions as dictated by management logic, geopolitics and economic power. Their guise of 'someplace else and far away' conceals the machinic patterns and cycles of value creation. It is there that our parallel and dissonantly experienced everyday lives of the most recent era of modernity

7. Sylvère Lotringer, 'Remember Foucault', *October* 126, Fall 2008, Cambridge MA, pp.11–12

become manifest. Such dissonances are unified and thus concealed by the fantasy of globalization. Our brand of modernity is monstrously multi-headed. *Headless* looks it in the eye without there being any end in sight. That may seem eerie, since no beginning can be reconstructed either. Hydra has joined the chicken and the egg. The construction of fiction productively played out in that constellation gives voice to the current uneasiness with the global fiction. The artistic construct of the present is a temporal and spatial shift.

“As the focus within the discursive is upon permanent displacement, it provides a location for refusal and collective ennui. The permanent displacement and projection of the critical moment is the political potential of the discursive. The opposite of performance, it is not a location for action but instead provides an infinite suspension of critical moments.”<sup>8</sup> Not the artists, but a small number of artworks “... expose a power relationship with the culture.”<sup>9</sup> In other words: they do seem to have a language for this.

8. Liam Gillick, 'Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three?', Hermes Lecture, 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, November 2008, p.28.

9. *Ibid.*, p.28.