

JAN VERWOERT
GATHERING PEOPLE LIKE THOUGHTS

ON HOSTING AS AN UNORTHODOX FORM OF AUTHORSHIP DEDICATED TO THE PRACTICE OF
ANTON VIDOKLE

What is the relationship between hosting and authorship? Is a host an author? Is hosting a form of authorizing something? Authorizing what? A social process? With what authority? That of an author? Gathering people like one would gather thoughts? Perhaps. But if a host should be a little like an author, would an author then not also be a little like a host? Gathering thoughts like a host would summon guests? Maybe. If this, however, should be so, what does it mean for our understanding of hosting and authorship as forms of cultural production?

I won't be able to give you authoritative answers. This is because the position I speak from is tied up with the very questions I am trying to address: As an author, I speak to you now because I am being hosted by the artist Anton Vidokle—whose guest I am on these pages. He has been a good host to me many times, in the process of doing what he does as an artist and in this sense as an author, by creating places and occasions for creatures like me, him, you, us to gather, by attracting a public to engage with and by developing an economy to sustain our practice. Conversely, speaking from the position of a recurrent guest, being associated with my host, I find that in writing this text I, in my turn, should try host the spirit of this association. It's a matter of principle. As an author, I like to free associate and to associate myself freely with people who, like Vidokle, are dedicated to the spirit of free association, intellectually, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and politically. To mimic the form of this association through a mode of associating thoughts is what I would like to try here—to invoke, host, and voice the spirit of this exchange. This is just my voice. But if it is to have any resonance and credence, it should voice something else as well: the spirit in which free spirits would want to associate. If I can't voice it, I fail as an author because I fail these spirits as a host.

To begin with, here is a provisional definition of authorship: Authorship is founded through the creation of a voice. What is the job, the task, the vocation of this voice? Practically, it is to begin, to follow through and to conclude a discourse. A discourse? Meaning: a stream of words, thoughts, stories, ideas, or images, a series of articulations or manifestations unfolding (according to) a pattern, structure, or choreography that allows for ideas and emotions to take shape. To authorize then is to start a discourse by raising your voice and to begin speaking—assuming, perhaps presumptuously, that someone, anyone, would want to listen. To authorize also means to inhabit the space you open up through your voice, your discourse, to spend time in this space, furnish it and turn it into a place for living (which is what followthrough means: to learn and live with the profane reality of your works and words, once they are born, and stand by them). Finally, to authorize implies knowing a way to conclude, sum up and say what you said, to bring a point home and give an edge to it or, in a final unsuspected twist, throw everything open once more. These are the techniques of authorizing, the ones that matter. Technically, signing with your name also certainly plays a role. But, for a signature to signify, the symbolic act of signing alone won't do. It's only when the signature resonates with a voice, when a voice is resonating from within it, that the signature acquires any meaning, the little meaning it has by default, as one material trace produced in the course of the signifying practice of unfolding authorship. Call it a pragmatist idealist's convictions, call it experience, but I just think that this is how it works.

Now, what is the relationship between the voice of authorship and the authorship of hosting? At its most basic, the voice of authorship is only ever such a voice when it hosts other voices. (I should know. This is my second language. All words I use in English are gifts I have received or goods I have stolen from voices that have spoken to me.) The reason you listen to an author is because the associated words, ideas, stories, images, thought patterns, motifs, notions, and emotions

that constitute her or his voice actually resonate with other voices, including yours. Because the association of the integral elements of that voice testifies to a possible association of different spirits, bodies of thought and states of emotion. Because the space of the discourse opened up and furnished by the voice is inhabited (or haunted) by many spirits, bodies, and states and therefore presents itself, in an inviting way, as habitable, as a place to which you may want to come and spend time in the company of those spirits. Were that not so, a work would just speak to itself. Maybe not even that. A body of work that offers something for others to share is a resonating body that makes the voices of many others resound. Yet, for echoes and resonances to become audible someone, I believe, has to make a sound, play a tune, or lay down a rhythm. Someone has to start playing. One thing presupposes the other. For one voice to be a voice it takes many to give it its sound. And for many voices to resound, it seems, it takes a resonating body to make them audible.

If that should be so, though I may be jumping to conclusions here, then the subjectivity generated by hosting as a form of authorship and authorship as a form of hosting is by definition a collective subjectivity. Likewise collectivity—the mode in which people appear in the social world when they are drawn together or set apart by the force of particular desires and the urge to share them in specific ways—only comes into effect when it manifests itself in some kind of subjectivity that would make the multiplicity of its voices resonate. So, to speak of a subjectivity here, in this particular manner, is not an invocation of what is commonly, pejoratively, referred to as “subjectivism.” There is no “ism”, no ideology at play in the process by which a collective subjectivity is instituted through being hosted by a voice. It is a simple material process, just a matter of practice and technique. The institution of a collective subjectivity is the material process through which a particular form of consciousness is generated in art and thinking, a form of consciousness that is temporarily hosted by the work,

body, or space that generates it. Hosting in this sense is the act of lending a body, a mind, a soul to this consciousness for it to actualize itself under specific material conditions of space, time, and money. This particular consciousness couldn't exist otherwise. Being hosted by and within a collective subjectivity is the only mode of its possible existence. Ideology, of course, can always creep back into the process in which consciousness is produced in the mode of collective subjectivity. History shows that it often does. But it doesn't have to. The point is to find means to keep this from happening, by making things happen in a manner and spirit that is decidedly different.

Practically then, the authorship of the host is founded through a material practice as much as through the invocation of a particular spirit: a material practice that makes divergent forces converge as a collective subjectivity, even if only fleetingly, in the form of bodies, spaces, words, and works that resonate (with each other) in a spirit that defies ideology. One is inseparable from the other. Materially, collective subjectivities only emerge when the spirit is right, just as, conversely, the spirit only feels right when the material conditions in place allow the possibility of a collective subjectivity to emerge. But how does this work? Could there be a manual for teaching people the material practice and the spirit—the protocols and prayers—for authorizing this moment of emergence? Maybe, because if a certain pragmatism, a dedication to the practicalities of practice, were crucial to the authorship of the host, then writing a manual should be possible (if not imperative). Reflections on this form of authorship not addressing the profane reality of practice would miss the point. Likewise they would be useless if they didn't include advice on how to invoke the spirit of a collective subject and therefore, perhaps, read a little bit like a book of incantations.

Then, practically and spiritually, the magic of hosting would lie in mastering of the forms, formats and formalities that enable one to

summon people, spirits, ideas, and images. In other words, hosting would be the craft of conducting ceremonies of invocation and convocation according to a protocol that ensured not only that the gathering happens at all, but also that it happens in the desired spirit. This craft is a traditional skill. It belongs to the practical knowledge once passed on through traditions. In fact, you could say that this was one of the practical purposes of traditions: to provide proper occasions for gathering—in the form of religious holidays, for instance, or rites of passage such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals—and bestowing the office of the host on someone schooled in conducting those ceremonies. Likewise in art and thinking, traditions provided the reason and occasion to gather your thoughts and make work. These took the form of social events on the occasion of which a piece would be commissioned (e.g., a speech to be delivered, a play to be staged, a composition to be performed, new clothes to be worn, a painting to be revealed on or exhibited in commemoration of the event), but also in the form of motifs and genres that provide the reason—or rather, the pretext—for organizing your thoughts around a theme in the course of its interpretation.

The key to a defiant manner of handling these social customs traditionally resided in the art of taking the (re-)interpretation of an established convention, genre, or theme as the occasion to, on a subtextual level, let whatever other ideas one was entertaining slip into the commissioned piece. This clandestine practice of irreverent renditions is at the heart of the culture of unorthodoxy; it epitomizes the spirit of acting and thinking in defiance of ideology. Yet this is also precisely the manner in which good hosts—hosts who seek to invoke the spirit of criticality and convoke likeminded souls—would want to act and think. The question then is: How does one perform the practice of hosting in this different spirit, that is, in an unorthodox manner? How can one be an unorthodox host?

It's not easy. In fact, after the wholesale dismissal of tradition that characterized modernism we seem to find ourselves deprived of proper occasions for unorthodox action and thought. So, paradoxically, in the light of modernism's critique, to rely on the formalities of traditional protocol—if only to use them as a pretext for unorthodox interpretations—no longer feels like an option. Since, after the denigration of tradition, the proper occasion for a ceremony of gathering and the habitual authority of the master of that ceremony are no longer always already established in advance of their actual production, neither are the routines and authorities to unsettle so easily identified and targeted anymore. Consequently, the spirit of unorthodoxy wanders in search of houses to haunt. The challenge to the authorship of the contemporary host is therefore twofold. She or he must first of all invent a proper occasion for hosting and invent a pretext for gathering. As a contemporary host, the author—and, as a contemporary author, the host—is called forth to conjure up names of saints, seasons or rites of passage to celebrate and themes to interpret in order for guests to be invited, audiences to be invoked, thoughts to be gathered and works to be created. (This is what exhibition and event programming in art spaces or the commissioning of texts for a magazine—and likewise the development of themes to riff on in the process of writing or making art—is effectively about). The second and perhaps most demanding challenge is to host unorthodox spirits in an unorthodox manner, to give wandering spirits and hungry ghosts a home while potentially being one of them oneself. One must find a building for others to haunt while being in search of such a spiritual home oneself, thus, as a host, performing the double role of being the keeper of the building and one of the spirits that it houses.

But even if many old traditions have been dismissed, one might object, this does not mean they haven't been replaced by new orthodoxies. Don't those, then, also offer ample opportunities for clandestine engagement? Surely. The protocols of the art market, the

rites of academia or routines of museum culture, for instance, no doubt seem to present unorthodox spirits with many ceremonies in which to insinuate themselves and an overall social fabric into which to weave their own threads. Let's assume that this happens, and that to name those spirits would be to betray them. Yet, since it is the horizon of modernism within which we now seek to grasp the foundations of hosting as an unorthodox form of authorship (and authorship as an unorthodox form of hosting), the stakes are raised. This is because what modernism placed at stake is the dream and demand of autonomy: the hope and claim that the power of a cultural practice to truly make a difference was inseparable from the freedom to determine its own conditions. Despite the many disillusionments that this hope will be exposed to in a lifetime and the general awareness of the intricate dependencies that entering the field of art inevitably produces, it would be plain mad to give up the claim to this freedom. Not least because, as contemporary host-authors, we do have a pride of profession to defend. And this professional ethos resides in the contentious assertion that we are free to summon—and be summoned by—the spirits we believe in and trust, and by those only.

It's laughable, I know, because after all we are talking about wandering spirits, and those are notoriously difficult to handle. To put your trust in them and ground an ethos in the possibility of their invocation seems extremely unwise. Can the hungry ghosts of unorthodox spirits ever be trusted to appear when summoned? Are they not way too volatile? Perhaps, but there must be ways to lure them. They are hungry. So it cannot possibly be that hard to offer them something to tempt their appetite, can it? But isn't this also precisely why hungry ghosts will never be faithful companions? Won't they accept any food offered and thus swallow anyone's bait? No, they won't. That we almost be sure of. Hungry ghosts cherish their hunger. They know that the promise of saturation is the appeal of bad faith. If there is autonomy, from the vantage point of hungry ghosts, it must lie in the ability to authorize

your hunger, to grasp its laws—the conditions of alienation, the ill logic of desires—and to get a grip on them so as to no longer be under the spell of these laws but rather in a position to twist them, in unorthodox ways, into unorthodox shapes. To do this sort of twisting in the pursuit of autonomy is precisely what defines the signifying practice of a modern host/author as unorthodox. It is in and through the performance of this twist that the authority of this kind of authorship is founded. It resides in this twist, in the joy, pain, anger and laughter emanating from this twist: in the spirit of your twisting.

Like the constitution of a subjectivity, the performance of the twist is a collective effort. No one can do this twist alone. To perform it, one must be aided by the supportive spirits of many a hungry ghost, twisted sister, or visitor arriving in your building, mind and work from nearby or far away to help you find the themes to improvise on as well as the occasions, pretexts, and techniques to do so. Like subjectivity, then, the authority of the twist is by definition shared and therefore divided, if not dissipated, between many spirits. It only comes into effect when the twist modifies the way in which those spirits think together, think of themselves together, or experience a different manner of being together in the very act of thinking together. The authority of the twist lies in its credence. This credence can only be generated and invested by an association of people who, together, validate a shared experience as credible. So the authority/credence (these thus being synonyms) of a twist is born out of the moment of sharing its experience. It's the momentum of this moment. It's the momentum of different spirits authorizing the experience they have produced together, through realizing that it has had an effect on—and in this sense acquires a certain authority/credence in relation to—the way they experience themselves and the mode in which they are together, differently, from now on.

MARILYN
DILEMMAS OF LOVE, HONOR, AND CRITIQUE
BY ANTON VIDOKLE

If the twist is a shared moment with a certain momentum, it will very likely leave an imprint on your memories. But this imprint will remain unsigned. You cannot put a signature under the imprint of momentum. It is nothing anyone could claim as private property. The momentum of a twist is the public property of an assembly of unorthodox spirits, contingent on the manner of their association and the credence they might generate together. If collective subjectivity, then, is a form of consciousness (a spirit) produced through—inherent to and transported by—particular forms of material practice, then the practice of the twist is the mode by which the production of this material consciousness is modified. If performing the twist (in the act of interpreting a theme or an occasion in an irreverent fashion) is what unorthodox spirits desire to do, then the mode in which they would want to be hosted is one that invites such modifications. The nights and days Anton Vidokle has hosted in different places and buildings have left an imprint on my memory that has modified my thinking. I'd like to believe that I have shared the momentum of this experience with others. But you shouldn't try to fix a twist in words like that. Sticking to formalities will only spoil it. Be that as it may, all of this is to say thank you. To the host!