The Filibuster

The Filibuster- a 12 hour durational performance piece featuring a series of female identifying performers speaking spontaneously, tackling the baggage around public discourse and women.

Who else was involved in the work? The Filibuster is a collaboration between Anna Snaith, Professor of 20th Century Literature at King’s College, artist Deborah Pearson and Edward Bagenal, Goldsmiths College Department of Design, brokered and supported by the Cultural Institute at King’s in partnership with Somerset House Studios.

When did it happen? Date (of publication, performance, installation, etc.): The Filibuster 12 hour performance - Saturday 2 September 2017, 10:00-22:00 Location: Great Arch Hall, South Wing, Somerset House, Strand, London WC8 1LA

Why:

The opportunity to collaborate to create a public forum for female identifying participants, speaking spontaneously, tackling the issues surrounding public discourse and women was the primary trigger for creating the installation. 12 women consecutively spent one hour each speaking at a podium in an improvised stream of consciousness, responding to a question that was provided on the day preventing the participants being able to prepare in any way. The performance asked what it means for women to be given a platform, what is said by women who are permitted and required to speak and be listened to, and what happens when women lose their filters and the ability to self-censor or think before they speak. The lack of women in public or senior leadership roles is a topical issue and The Filibuster explores the ways in which this is bound up with gender and the act of public articulation. The installation and performance addressed how issues of preparedness, authority and forum play into these questions and how they register differently in relation to age, cultural and socio-economic background.

How:

The curation of the speeches and the speakers’ presence, through the designing and building of a functioning podium within a specific public gallery space at Somerset House was informed by ideas from politics, public speaking and also by the concept of ‘the forum’ and ‘platform’, as social and cultural entities, both historically and in contemporary society, culture and politics.
Several possible arrangements and placements of the audience and participant speakers were considered through initial iterations of designs, with differing elevations and lighting of the speakers in relation to the audience present, the way they were seated or standing, able to move through the space or otherwise. Also, the inclusion of various visible
modes of displaying a clock or timer that would measure the 60-minute period for which each speaker would be required to speak, which was critical in communicating the way in which a filibuster currently operates in politics, was introduced in several forms as visual designed prototypes, using drawings and 3D modelling software. The latter allowed a greater sense of reality prior to implementing the designed installation in situ. Critically, the displayed timing of each speaker’s 60-minute duration was hidden from the speaker, but was clearly visible as a large digital display facing the audience. This feature created a tension and sense of urgency in both the speaker and the audience that shifted the balance of power within the experience for both parties and also triggered a far greater engagement by the audience with the conceptual framework of the piece. The whole performance was also captured on video and documented throughout with photographs. The participant speakers were also recorded in interview before and after their speeches and a film about the piece was produced by Somerset House Studios several weeks afterwards, analysing the event and its effects with the project team and several of the participants in conversation.

**What:**

The durational performance was publicised broadly as part of the Somerset House programme of events at the time and the location of the Great Arch Hall gallery, acting as the main entrance to Somerset House from the Victoria Embankment meant that anyone entering or exiting Somerset House throughout the 12 hours, via that entrance became an audience member. Several members of the audience stayed throughout the 12-hour duration. It was also an important part of the design of the performance that the participant speakers were themselves an audience, in that they were required to speak, unprepared, for an hour at the podium. As this form of secondary, participant audience, the speakers using the installation had their own sense of agency shifted and redressed and this was both a critical and primary function of the design, also. The installation is designed very much as a tool for instilling agency in both its users and audience via a public forum and through the speakers’ participation in and use of the installation. The installation was also designed to exist and be installed repeatedly, in other locations in the future, as a moveable feast and as such has a life beyond this event, with other participant speakers and audiences.