



**Edith and Hans, 2016**

Ellen Mara De Wachter responds to Sarah Staton's  
University of Bristol commission

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There is a long view from the top of the hill on which *Edith and Hans* sits. It's etched into my mind's eye as I sit by my window in London. From the vantage point of Sarah Staton's 2016 social sculpture, which is situated among some of the University of Bristol's residential halls, the rolling oblongs of lorries seemed to hover their way across a long ridge, outlined against the sky. A wide valley slopes down to the Bristol Channel, which shines like a strip of silver. This outlook is framed by trees in the middle distance, and the building blocks of student life in the foreground. Here, in London, the view is shorter, activity is compressed and perspective flattened – I can see into the living rooms of the neighbouring apartment building and the traffic of the main road is just 30 feet away. It's a far cry from the soothing horizons that surround *Edith and Hans*.

In anticipation of my visit to the sculpture, I mapped out the route I would take to reach it, I studied photographs to understand its shapes and textures, and I tried to figure out the spatial logic of its parts. I imagined sitting down on its pennant stone seats and I tried to conjure up the sensation of running my hands across its surfaces. As the train to Bristol shot me through fields blanketed with freezing fog, the absence of a view from the window allowed me to withdraw into my inner senses and visualise my first encounter with the work. Now that the visit has taken place, I can layer the artefacts of my anticipation with my actual experience of the work into a sandwich of imagined and real experience, and I am struck by the difference between the two forms of encounter.

In an age when so many artworks are conceived to be photographed, when unconscious concessions are made for maximum online popularity, and when the circulation of art is so frequently a function of its representation in digital photographs and on social media, what does it mean for a work to privilege people's presence, to ask for our time and our touch? In considering the act of sitting as an essential aspect of *Edith and Hans*, Staton is part of a lineage that also includes the Austrian sculptor Franz West. West is known for his exuberant public seating works, vast pink sausages and colourful curlicues on which people can perch, climb and play. He once told the story of the eureka moment in which he understood the purpose of sitting in an art work: "When I was fifteen I went to Rome, and because I was alone there I went to the Spanish Steps, where you could meet people [...]. From that experience came this ideal of sitting in the art, like a goal of sitting in the clouds: sitting in the art consuming life."

Staton is an artist who explores the relationship between materials, design, landscape and architecture. If *Edith and Hans* invites us be present in body and spirit, it also rewards us for time spent in its company. The structure's intention is revealed by its architectural classification: as a belvedere its purpose is, literally, to offer a 'beautiful view'. Composed of two L-shaped walls, one tucked inside the other to create a corridor, *Edith and Hans* can be read alternately like a section of a house, or a fragment from a maze. The benches installed on the inner corner of one wall and along the outside of the other provide opportunities to face one another or to sit looking in opposite directions. As a structure that is situated at some distance from the student halls of residence, it can also function as a getaway from work and isolation, providing an opportunity to spend time outdoors. But above all, *Edith and Hans* is freely accessible. In its openness and its invitation to be inhabited, it is a site in which life plays itself out. This is what makes it a 'social sculpture', in the lineage proposed by the German artist Joseph Beuys, who viewed life itself as a

‘social sculpture’, in which everyone participates through making and shaping the world creatively. Exploring the methods and potential of social sculptures within the format of exhibitions and through bespoke public artworks is a mainstay of Staton’s oeuvre, from her original *SupaStore*, an ongoing collaborative project begun in 1993, which has offered hundreds of artists the opportunity to meet, network and sell their work in cities across the globe, to her 2014 outdoor pavilion *Steve*, a permanent installation on Folkestone’s harbour wall, which is used daily by local residents.

One way of considering the differences between artworks is through the notion of intensity – the quality or degree of force and energy a work exerts on people. Some works operate at a high intensity, immediately overwhelming anyone in their range with sensation, or giving the viewer an all-consuming aesthetic or conceptual experience. Others vibrate at mid frequencies, and in doing so they may or may not register very deeply with people. Then there are works that stealthily give off a low and constant energy, that in one way or another harness the attention and power of the people or other forces around them. In the presence of these works, time takes on a different significance, perhaps even seeming to slow down. They may provoke a sense of enjoyment or wonder, catalysing a transformation in the bodies or spirits of those who experience them.

*Edith and Hans* is one of these low intensity transformative works. In a world in which interpersonal communication often takes place through digital systems owned and operated by corporations, *Edith and Hans* allows for truly private exchanges to take place. In providing a space for face-to-face conversation or shoulder-to-shoulder silence, it encourages a revolutionary intimacy. The sculpture holds these virtues from a combination of its layout, material and aesthetic make-up. Its walls are made of local bricks. Tougher blue bricks reclaimed from the floor of a cowshed are laid out in a wall that resembles an inky night sky, while softer red bricks bring to mind a glowing sunset. As the remnants of fallen-down buildings, these elements recall the ruins that were so fashionable in 18th and 19th century Britain. Stately gardens would be dotted with follies and pavilions intended to resemble the vestiges of antique civilisations.

*Edith and Hans* is altogether more robust, eschewing whimsy in favour of a nod to both the modernist architectural ambitions and the decorative elements of nearby halls of residence. The belvedere is situated within a constellation of buildings that between them offer an informal history of popular architectural styles from the early 20th century up until the present day. On one side is Wills Hall, inaugurated in 1929 and built in the Strawberry Gothic style to look like buildings from a much earlier time. On the other, a collection of modernist blocks intent on finding a form to best suit their function. *Edith and Hans* acknowledges these two architectural tendencies through the herringbone pattern of its brick walls, which cleverly echoes the parquet floors in the refectories at both Wills Hall and Hiatt Baker Hall, which was built in the 1960s.

The inward-facing surfaces of *Edith and Hans*’s walls are clad in handmade terracotta tiles that bear a decorative motif of interlaced currency symbols, like the tendrils of an exotic financial creeper. This ‘Esperanto of Currency’, in which Yen, Yuan, US Dollar, Euro, Rupee and British Pound mesh together in a pattern, takes the eye and the mind on a journey of investigation, setting us a reading exercise in the language of

international finance. To lean back and rest on the tiles provides a bodily knowledge gained through feeling the texture and pattern of symbols for money. The Esperanto also alludes to the relationship between income and physical wellbeing, it reminds us that wealth or poverty are frequently manifested in the body.

Staton's pattern of currencies is related to another pattern: that of the increasing commercialisation of higher education and its correlated internationalisation. This Esperanto is the language of global business, and it has transformed education in Britain since 1998, when tuition fees were first introduced, putting an end to what Staton refers to as the 'golden age of free education'. But it also indicates an increasingly international student body, marked by different cultures, languages and beliefs. Staton points out that the time since the crash of 2008 was characterised by a sense of waiting for a new economic, social or political system to get underway.

2016, the year the sculpture was made, was a year of dramatic political change in Europe and the United States. *Edith and Hans* became a place in which to sit and reflect on the meaning of a new status quo, to catch one's breath and recover from seismic shifts in our understanding of the world. From the local to the global, Staton addressed these shifts in an earlier body of work, *How the West Has Won and Lost* (1994-ongoing), comprising in part a series of object paintings, to consider socio-economic and political questions. These 'anti-paintings' are made primarily by bleaching text into denim *The Masses are Massive*, *24/7 Business*, *Black Harvest*, to name a few. Staton sees the series as 'a body of work to mark the passing of the American century', in which the USA dominated global economics and culture. The repercussions of such global shifts are also felt at a local level, where they impact on lives and livelihoods, and can introduce uncertainty and instability.

By working with clay culled from local pits, Staton has built a structure that grows out of the ground it sits on. This reinforces its sense of permanence and rootedness. The bricks and earthen tiles capture the heat of the sun, and give it back to those who sit within the work's embrace. The tiles were fired in a wood fired kiln, whose smoke affects the colour of the tiles placed closest to the flame, turning them from red to grey – a metaphor, perhaps, for global economic fluctuations in which so much currency goes up in smoke.

Beyond the structure itself, *Edith and Hans* is also a place, demarcated by an Elizabethan-style planting scheme of hollyhocks, coloured grasses and jewel-like fritillaries. So, just as the belvedere will be marked by the weather and atmospheric conditions, the botanical aspects of the work will undergo seasonal transformations. Cupped in a shallow bowl carved out of the gentle hill on which it sits, *Edith and Hans* offers endless possibilities for the theatre of life. Sitting there, one imagines that long view in other seasons, at other times of day or at night. Traces of use, muddy footprints and coffee stains evidence the passage of people, and promise a return, to sit, talk and gaze out at the world.

**Ellen Mara De Wachter** is a writer and curator based in London. She is a regular contributor to Frieze magazine and her writing has appeared in numerous exhibition publications. Her book *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration* is published by Phaidon. She is a Visiting Lecturer in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art, and has taught at the Royal Academy Schools, Goldsmiths College, Brighton University, Newcastle University among other places. In 2013-15 she was Curator of Public Collection Development at the Contemporary Art Society, where she was responsible for CAS's acquisitions scheme for museums across the UK. Prior to that, she worked at the British Museum, Barbican Art Gallery, and Zabłudowicz Collection.

**Sarah Staton** creates work combining a sculptor's sensibility with design, landscape and architecture. Her commissions have explored the interaction between audience and environment, for example becoming habitable or capable of supporting life. Sarah is interested in the tactile qualities and mix of hard and soft materials in the environment, an idea she returns to repeatedly in her work. Staton's work is held in collections all over the world including the Arts Council of England, British Museum, Henry Moore Institute, MIMA, Sunderland, South London Gallery and Tate, as well as private collections in Europe, North America and Japan. Staton is Senior Tutor at the Royal College of Art in London where she also lives and works.

### **University of Bristol**

*Edith and Hans* was commissioned by the University of Bristol and produced by Field Art Projects. It is the first permanent commission to be delivered as part of the University's Stoke Bishop public art programme and forms the second phase, following on from an artist residency by Melanie Jackson carried out in 2013. The public art programme at Stoke Bishop forms part of the University's commitment and overall ambition for public art set out in its 2008 international public art strategy. It seeks to meet a number of objectives that include adding to its growing collection of outstanding temporary and permanent artworks, reinforcing the distinctive aspects of the different types of gardens and parkland surrounding the halls of residence. The programme is also creating distinctive new landmarks throughout the grounds that can become meeting and talking points, promote orientation and encourage new uses of overlooked spaces.

**Field Art Projects** is an art consultancy based in Bristol run by curator and commissioner Theresa Bergne. Established in 1999, the organisation focus on commissioning visual artists, designers and performers to create permanent and temporary public artworks and events. Field Art Projects wrote the public art strategy for the University of Bristol's residential site at Stoke Bishop in 2012 and have delivered the programme to date.