UNIVERSITY OF READING

# WORK IN PROGRESS: FORM AS A WAY OF THINKING

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## ABSTRACT

At the heart of his 1962 book *The Open Work*, in a chapter on 'Form as Social Commitment', Umberto Eco writes: 'Form must not be a vehicle for thought, it must be a way of thinking.'

Over ten chapters that alternate between 'theory' and 'practice', I attempt to articulate, elaborate and perform how this ethos plays out in a hybrid art/design practice today.

The 'theory' chapters discuss key aspects of forming-as-a-way-of-thinking. The first identifies those aspects of Eco's original argument most relevant to my extension of it here. The second shows how self-reflexivity in art can productively model such an approach, without becoming an end in itself. The third considers what it means to make and keep work 'in movement', adapting to and registering contingencies along the way. The fourth argues how this can make for markedly 'articulate' objects – work that refuses the crutch of supporting material, effectively captioning itself, and so embodying a particular sense of 'decency' and 'good manners'. The last chapter contends that a borderline art/design disposition is peculiarly suited to this way of working, and that the grey area between the two domains is fertile ground for it to play out right now.

Each 'practice' chapter recounts an idiosyncratic publishing project, usually produced together with David Reinfurt under the name Dexter Sinister in response to an open invitation from an art institution. The last of these took place during the final few months' work on the thesis, and as such, epitomizes the essence of the work advocated here: it is emphatically *in progress*.

The work draws freely from art, design, literature, and philosophy, with recurring reference to a core group comprising both seminal figures (e.g. T.W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, David Foster Wallace), marginal polymaths (e.g. Stefan Themerson, Anthony Froshaug, Richard Hollis) and close colleagues (e.g. Robin Kinross, Mike Sperlinger, Jan Verwoert). I also refer throughout to other art and artists past and present, with extended thoughts on a number of recent artworks to illustrate points made in the essays.

In 'Form as Social Commitment', Eco laid out an aesthetic theory to explain why he considers what he identifies as Open Works to be the most exemplary art of the era. Some 50 years on, I argue why the work described and performed here can be deemed just as 'authentic' – timely and pertinent – today.

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

**Acknowledgements**

This work is written first for Francesca Bertolotti, my almost wife at the time of writing, who dislikes the fact that *significant others* are generally mentioned last in lists of acknowledgements like this. In any case, she has simply been its most insightful and outspoken reader.

Any reference to 'my' or 'our' work here always refers to that made in collaboration mainly with David Reinfurt under the name Dexter Sinister, or less frequently with Will Holder as Will Stuart – and even these pseudonyms often involve members of the larger constellation of colleagues that has grown up around *Dot Dot Dot* (since 2000) and its successor *Bulletins of The Serving Library* (since 2011). When relevant, I'll indicate the precise nature of each collaboration as and when it crops up in the text. Although David and Will are complicit with my drawing together this array of collaborative work, the outcome naturally leans towards my own biases and interests; they are hugely responsible for provoking and shaping the ideas here, but it would be wrong to assume they unequivocally share them. Still, after all the disclaimers: this work is also theirs – and duly dedicated to them, too.

Further thanks are due to: Angie Keefer, co-founder (with David and myself) of The Serving Library, which really amounts to the next chapter; Paul Stiff and Karel Martens, my two most incisive teachers at The Universty of Reading's Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, and the Werkplaats Typografie in Arhnem, respectively; Robin Kinross and Richard Hollis, consistently exemplary practitioner-writers and guiding lights; John Russell and Alun Rowlands of The University of Reading's Department of Fine Art, for overseeing the development of this thesis; and then Mark Beasley, Peter Bilak, Ruth Blacksell, Michael Bracewell, Paul Elliman, Ryan Gander, Karel Martens, John Morgan, Paulina Olowska, Lucas Quigley, Robert Snowden, Mike Sperlinger, and Arlo & Frances Stark. Further colleagues and collaborators are listed in footnote 42 on pages 68–69.

Finally, thanks to my parents for their continuing support of, and interest in, these frequently obscure activities.

SB, Liverpool, July 2015

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**Note on orthography**

The main body is typeset in one of three main ways. Foremost, my own newly written text is set in Times, like this.

Previously written material that I'm either fully or partly responsible for is set to the same margins in Helvetica, like this. (See also the note the first time it happens in the middle of page 36.)

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Longer quotations of others' work are indented in Courier, like this.
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Additionally, where it has seemed particularly relevant and relatively convenient, I have maintained the original typography of a previously published piece, along with its spelling, punctuation, and former pagination. When and why this happens is always obvious, and the original context fully noted.

Finally, I sometimes use a pair of *bracketing asterisks* as a form of emphasis distinct from *italics*, a technique developed together with my co-editors for *Bulletins of The Serving Library* (see §2.4) that's become habitual. The asterisks are intended to insinuate something along the lines of a *knowing acknowledgement* – or at least something more winking and less vigorous than plain italic.

‘The nature of uncarved blocks is how to describe what’s hard to describe.’[1]

‘I reckon it would take a year to write, and in a year I should pass through a rich variety of moods – so would the book – in that at least it would have some verisimilitude to life.’[2]

‘As soon as this is written it will be full of holes.’[3]

[1] Taoist proverb.

[2] Charles Pry, the protagonist of E.C. Large’s *Asleep in the Afternoon* [1938] (London: Hyphen Press, 2008).

[3] Germano Celant, ‘Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrila War’, *Flash Art*, no. 5, 1967.

# 0: SKELETON

In 1962 the Italian polymath Umberto Eco published *The Open Work*, a cross-disciplinary survey of incomplete or ambiguous artworks designed to be 'completed' by the artist, performers or audience during the particular performance or reception.[1] In Eco's opinion, this was the truly 'authentic' art of the modern era – meaning timely, pertinent and exemplary.

Inasmuch as we perceive the world exclusively through forms, he says, we require 'perceptive tools' appropriate to the human condition in order to properly apprehend it – ideally with a view to improving it. Consciously or not, all aesthetic work provides these tools, so all those working with form are in some measure responsible for the way in which we comprehend the world.

In Eco's view, the 'socially committed' artist works to develop forms that are appropriate to, which is to say congruent with, the contemporary condition. This is the perpetual vocation of the avant-garde (a term that Eco uses without hesitation, though it is clearly passé today): grappling with outmoded, impotent forms in the push for newly potent ones. This approach is less concerned with representing or expressing already-held impulses and ideas, more with seeking new ones.

At the heart of *The Open Work*, Eco proclaims: 'Form must not be a vehicle for thought, it must be a way of thinking.'

Now, if in their most general senses 'form' means a lasting encounter between atoms that hold good together,[2] and 'thinking' the process of relating two or more discrete ideas in order to yield new ones, then 'form as a way of thinking' in its most skeletal and pedantic sense describes the process of *manipulating sensory matter* – whether verbal or graphic – *by juxtaposing, connecting or configuring already existing ideas with a view to generating new ones*. It is a fundamentally constructive, progressive process.

Eco's thinking remains entirely plausible 50 years on, and it is a springboard for the present work. The aim is to explain and elaborate the mechanics and dynamics of forming-as-a-way-of-thinking – ultimately in order to draw out an implicit relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and with particular reference to work being made in the grey zone between art and graphic design today. Although I refer to many instances of my own and others' work, I want to articulate means not ends. Following Eco, the work I have in mind usually involves setting up conditions for work to play out in situ, in view of indirectly registering rather than directly commenting on the contemporary condition. It's a working ethos that consists in *how* something is made as much as *what*; that practises in lieu of preaching, and is all the more convincing for doing so.

I'll make my case by zigzagging between parallel chapters of so-called theory and practice.

The 'theory' chapters comprise free-ranging essays that elaborate my own ideas extending from Eco's work. They draw on related insights from as many close colleagues as seminal thinkers,[3] along with examples of art and artefacts past and present. The first comprises an overview of *The Open Work*, summarizing those aspects most relevant to my thinking, fleshing out Eco's idea of what makes for

[1] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* [1962, Italian] (Cambridge MA: Harvard, 1989).

[2] This line paraphrases the following: 'what do we mean by *form*? (a lasting encounter between atoms, joined together): they turn out to be *lasting* from the moment when their components form a whole whose sense "holds good" at the moment of their birth, stirring up new "possibilities of life" on a coherent level, in order to create a relationship to the world.' Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* [1998, French] (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002), p. 19.

[3] These two types are clearly distinguished in the thesis. Following the initial mention of a full name, I continue to refer to 'close colleagues' (which is usually also to say close friends) by forename and 'seminal thinkers' by surname. This may seem overly casual, but it feels right – simply because most of the ideas here have developed in sustained dialogue with the many people who've contributed to the two journals I've co-edited. That's to say, the lack of ordinary academic distance and disinterest seems worth acknowledging and replicating here inasmuch as it seems integral to the work.

properly ‘authentic’ art, and suggesting why I think forming-as-a-way-of-thinking inevitably results in symbiotic form and content. I then describe how a certain strain of artistic self-reflexivity can be seen to model this approach.

Next I elaborate the nature of ‘work in movement’, whereby a series of conditions are set up for a project to ‘play out’ and register contingencies met along the way. Constituent of this idea is that aesthetic impulses have a life of their own to be pursued with more or less fidelity to the fundamental ‘DNA’ of an idea, and that such work can usefully incorporate the story of its own making. Contrary to a commonplace, recondite sort of contemporary art that leans on the crutch of supporting material, this breed of work is *positively didactic* to the extent that it ‘captions itself’. I’m after a working embodiment of ‘decency’ and ‘good manners’, a set of working principles that seeks rather than shuts down relations. I propose that a borderline art/design disposition is peculiarly suited to this ethos, and that the confluence of fine art and graphic design is currently a productive place for it to play out, trailing work that ideally embodies, cultivates, and so perpetuates it.

Embedded within these chapters are a number of talks, letters and interviews that I’ve delivered, written and conducted since starting this thesis in 2010. These set pieces – a transcription of a talk, or a letter to a friend, for instance – are left more or less intact in view of embodying two key points: that forms can usefully carry the trace of circumstances; and that the form of the writing can communicate as much as the writing itself.

Between these ‘theory’ chapters, the ‘practice’ ones comprise case studies of realworld projects produced under the umbrellas of *Dot Dot Dot*, a left-field arts journal I co-founded and -edited between 2000–2010, and Dexter Sinister, the working name of myself and David Reinfurt since 2006; and so they amount to about a decade-and-a-half’s worth of thinking-by-doing. Like their theory counterparts, these accounts incorporate autonomous bits and pieces of writing produced at the time, transmitted from the middle of the project in question. Given that one of the crucial ideas here is the graphic and material realization of writing as part and parcel of the project, these excerpts are reproduced as close to their original form as is possible within this new container.[4] Inevitably, many of the ideas recounted in theory recur in practice, and vice versa. Generally speaking, I have not made any attempt to iron out such repetitions, as they are endemic to the whole process.

This all amounts to an argument for – and embodiment of – a self-generating praxis: a pertinent way of looking informs a pertinent way of working, which in turn informs a pertinent way of looking, etc.

The chapters alternate as follows – theory on white paper, practice on light grey.

**1. Form as a way of thinking**: As stated, this first theory chapter is an overview of *The Open Work* – a distillation of Eco’s key ideas and an expansion of those most pertinent to my thinking. I focus particularly on his account of what makes for ‘authentic’ (= exemplary) art in any era, and reinforce it with a few commensurate concepts, inlcuding T.W. Adorno’s explication of ‘essay’, Walter Benjamin’s ‘political tendency’, and Alain Badiou’s ‘fidelity to an event’. Eco notes that Open Works prioritize production over representation or expression as art’s essential ‘forming action’, an elaboration of his mentor Luigi Pareyson’s aesthetic philosophy. For them, ‘form’ is synonymous with ‘organism’, and art duly conceived as an organic process governed by autonomous laws in which each new case (piece of work, situation) generates its own ‘forming logic’. Forming-as-thinking therefore implies the inevitable symbiosis of form and content. I close with some similarly ‘anti-dualistic’ thinking from other fields.

**2. Dot Dot Dot**: Over ten years and 20 issues, *Dot Dot Dot* moved from being patently concerned with graphic design to something far more heterogeneous, sprawling across the humanities. At the same time it became increasingly ‘performative’ in the sense that contributions began to actively demonstrate as much as passively articulate a subject. This tendency extended to the manner in which

[4] – at least in terms of local *formatting* (meaning how the work was typeset and configured) if not actual *format* (meaning the original material, size, and surround). Although the text in between all the recycled matter in these practice chapters essentially tries to recuperate information lost to the original contexts, ideally of course the whole thing is *made new* in the process.

entire issues were produced; #15, for instance, was made entirely on-site over three weeks from the middle of a group show in Geneva, with the setup deliberately designed to leave some very visible marks on the product. All the ideas in this dissertation were incubated in the journal, to the extent that the present work effectively begins where the final issue (#20) left off. As such, the first half of this initial 'practice' chapter recounts the journal's ten-year trajectory as a practical preface, via a number of 'surrogate editorials' published in that final issue. The last and longest of these tells the story of a parallel action, the continuing collection and exhibition of diverse 'source material' (a polaroid, an oil painting, a Ouija board, etc. – each of which originally illustrated an essay in the journal). The chapter ends by explaining what happened next: a change of scenery called The Serving Library.

**3. Self-reflexivity as a model**: 'Self-reflexive' implies an automatic act of reflection on the matter at hand – like this sentence. In terms of art, it usually involves a given work 'bending back on itself' in order to draw attention to some degree of artifice, typically manifest by rendering a work's structure on a level with its subject matter; its form or style as apparent as its content or substance. Take a classic recursive text like *This statement is a lie*, or an image like a *Mise en abyme*: both set in motion a mental pendulum that induces intellectual vertigo. The work I have in mind likewise performs this oscillation of form and content to the degree that they are essentially one and the same, part and parcel. This is the sense in which self-reflexive work 'models' the symbiosis constituent of forming-as-a-way-of-thinking: it exemplifies and so propagates it. I argue that the most convincing cases are less the consequence of disinterested deployment of self-reflexive *tropes*, which are usually ironic, contrived and tired, but rather derive from a self-critical *temperament*, which is essentially earnest, constructive and so perpetually valid. I don't mean to make a case for self-reflexive work per se, only for working self-reflexively.

**4. Various True Mirrors**: 'True Mirror' is the trade name of a mirror specifically engineered to reflect reality without inverting the image on the horizontal axis like most mirrors do. It shows us how we appear to other people rather than the left/right switch we've come to take for granted. (This makes for an unpleasant experience that sets off a vain process of frantic self-adjustment.) We adopted the True Mirror as an emblem for a project at the 2008 Whitney Biennial that involved producing around 40 nominal 'Press Releases' in collaboration with a bunch of artists and writers who were invited to broadly *reflect on the show*. Each gnomic release was edited, designed and published by David and myself (as Dexter Sinister) in pronounced real-time over a concentrated three weeks, working from a hidden room in one of the Biennial's auxiliary locations. Although never sanctioned by the Whitney, these releases circulated under its auspices in view of injecting *noise* – a bit of productive slowness and confusion – into its usual PR channels. The diverse results included a rumour, a fax, a composition for cello and office machinery, and an unusually vocal elevator operator. Typically, the project was carried on via further iterations, most prominently a 'cubist variety show' based on a compact microfiche that re-channelled all the Press Releases made during those initial three weeks.

**5. Work in movement**: Back in 1936, Walter Benjamin urged artists to actively involve themselves in root-level production processes (e.g. printing, publishing, distributing) in order to circumvent the domesticating effects of conventional ways of doing things. In his view, every artistic tendency carries a political equivalent. Here I more fully articulate an approach that involves establishing a set of fundamental conditions or instructions for a work to 'play out': a program that runs a script. Eco frequently uses the term 'work in movement' alongside 'open work', and my summary understanding of the distinction is that where the latter cultivates multiple interpretations or ambiguous meanings, the former involves some kind of live, realtime aspect to convey a tangible sense of working from inside a flow of events. This is particularly apparent over a long period of time, when a single piece of work gets *re*worked, adapted or updated; or equally when entire bodies of work become increasingly re- and defined over an oeuvre. Along the way, I consider some discourse surrounding a recent group exhibition that offers some useful insight on the nature, difficulty and *point* of 'thinking contingency' – the tenuous, uncertain and surprising – in art and philosophy today. I suggest that any contemporary work which abides Eco's sense of authenticity is similarly compelled to refract the sense of 'radical contingency' that dominates our contemporary condition.

**6. Black Whisky and The First/Last Newspaper**: Both these projects involved virtually extinct and so particularly telling production processes. In the case of the whisky: distillation and letterpress; in the case of the newspaper: 'WYSIWYM' typesetting and 'Paste-up' layout. This chapter tracks the ways in

which these techniques influenced a number of written and visual forms. Black Whisky is the name of a co-operatively-funded 12-year malt distilled together with ex-publisher Christoph Keller in 2011. The idea was – or became – an excuse to meditate on the similarities and differences between publishing and distilling; to think through the benefits of 'slowness' relative to both; to explore communal production by assembling a cooperative share system; and naturally to make a plausible scotch along the way. While Keller oversaw the product, we 'framed' it by making a single piece of work with a three-fold purpose: to advertise, certify and label the eventual product. Meanwhile, *The First/Last Newspaper* was made from a space facing the *New York Times* offices in midtown Manhattan. Over three weeks, we produced six editions of a double-sided broadsheet under the auspices of the city's 2010 Performa festival of performance art, designed to reflect on the seismic shifts in news industry at a time when online competition was forcing many long-established newspapers to fold. We gathered a number of writers to report from the middle of this paradigm shift. As none of them were otherwise directly employed by the news industry, they offered an unusually disinterested vantage on the situation.

**7. Articulate objects**: Ideally the outcome of that work in movement, by 'articulate object' I mean work that 'speaks for itself', that is legible and autonomous in the sense that it doesn't rely on the crutch of supporting texts or other supplementary material, but is 'self-captioning'. Ideally, it teaches a reader how to read it. Consider, for instance, the line left by a pen hooked up to trace the tremor of an earthquake. This is partly an argument for the sort of work that offers the key to unlock the story of its construction, the work's 'genes' carried in the traces of technical processes (which might productively expose virtual products' relation to digital code as much as material products' relation to mechanical machinery). I then consider the ethics inherent in this ethos – the aforementioned 'decency' and 'good manners', two terms lifted from the sardonic yet earnest work of the Polish polymath Stefan Themerson, who was well aware of how pious they sounded, and intending to provoke. Building on his ideas in particular, I consider how the various qualities of openness, self-reflection, momentum and clarity related in the previous chapters amount to a kind of aesthetic decorum, and so too an ethical orientation analogous to Eco's 'social commitment'. The overarching interest in the confluence of aesthetics and ethics here is rooted in a particular conception of 'the modern movement' acquired by osmosis while an undergraduate at The University of Reading's Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, literally a stone's throw from Fine Art. In recuperating this largely lapsed term, 'the modern movement', I mean to emphasize a specific set of attitudes essentially distinct from customary conceptions of modernism. There's a rhetorical shortcut to all this: I want to isolate the 'movement' from the 'modern' and run with it.

**8. Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Fonts and 'Identity'**: Next up are two projects that explore subjects native to graphic design using digital media. In 1979, the computer scientist Donald Knuth wrote a piece of software called Metafont, that was designed to harness the essential 'intelligence' of letterforms in view of generating an infinite supply of fonts using a limited set of parameters. In 2009 we picked up where he left off in the mid-1980s, updating the idea to run on contemporary computers. We were less interested in making a tool to produce endless new fonts, and more in thinking about and around the *idea* of Metafont. We developed the software for use in a number of practical circumstances (exhibition signage, publications) and wrote a pair of accompanying essays set in the font whose story is told in the text. Both essays have been published on numerous pages and walls, each time revised according to the new context. They have also found form in digital media, most recently an animation-of-sorts called *Letter & Spirit*, and an identity for an art foundation, both of which involve a new parameter, Time – and so too a further promiscuous essay. This is followed by a parallel project called *'Identity',* a three-screen 'projection' we developed in 2011 that charts the emergence and proliferation of graphic identities since the turn of the 20th century. It's a mongrel cartoon-informational-film-essay that animates the typically fraught relationship between cultural and corporate spheres as contemporary art spaces become increasingly preoccupied with their own image. Three case studies are taken as coordinates from which to plot a broader landscape: the Centre Pompidou, MoMA, and the Tate. The projection's voiceover script was assembled almost entirely from existing texts, quoted and paraphrased way out of context. It's the most extreme instance of a working method that's cropped up to lesser degrees in the other projects recounted here: a particularly open-sourced kind of writing.

**9. Grey area**: Finally, I articulate more clearly how the practical projects recounted here embody the theory chapters' chain-link of ideas. To recap: I'm after a temperamentally self-reflexive way of working … that involves setting up the conditions for projects to play out in practice … ideally depositing articulate objects that speak for themselves … which amounts to an essentially humanist ethos commensurate with Eco's sense of 'social commitment'. Where once clearer channels for a socially-oriented design seem blocked, if not totally eradicated, the neighbouring domain of art is, for the time being at least, a space ambiguous and expansive enough to accommodate such orphaned interests. This displaced 'speculative' design is clearly no longer a straightforward problem-solving activity, nor does it claim to be. Like all modern art, its products aren't 'useful' in any obvious sense, only in the offset, fuzzy manner in which aesthetic work can function as intellectual-utilitarian *tools for thinking*. This ethos is apparent in a certain strain of contemporary work I see as having evolved in response to the increasingly dumb – mute, obfuscating, hermetic, stand-offish, and ultimately alienating – art of recent decades. I suggest the way in which they perpetuate Eco's 1962 sense of 'authentic', mirroring today's vanguard concerns. To conclude, I consider why a borderline art/design disposition is well suited to this work, and why the ambiguous zone between fine art and graphic design is a fertile place for it to take root right now.

**10. The Last ShOt Clock**: The thesis closes on an actual work in progress at the time of writing. It begins with a conversation between David and myself in advance of an event on Summer Solstice 2014 at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania. A year beforehand, we had participated in the joint Lithuania/Cyprus Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennial, which was staged in a sports hall under the reversible title *Oo* or *oO*. The show's locus was a basketball court flanked by concrete bleachers, and we proposed to manipulate the two large scoreboards at both ends, retooling them into two identically esoteric, hexadecimal clocks. On our way to an inaugural *Oo-oO* party staged in the same venue and lit solely by our clocks, we were falsely informed that it had been shut down and so headed off elsewhere – only later to run into a couple of wasted Lithuanians who said we'd in fact just missed a memorable event. And so under the working title 'The Last Shot Clock', our idea was to invoke the party we'd managed to miss by assembling a time-travelling *incantation*. We initially programmed the clocks with no particular purpose in mind, but in Lithuania they would finally be put to use – a use that, as we expected, was waiting to be realized all along. Ultimately, the clocks would become *time machines*, their logic used to structure a compilation of various ways and means of extracting oneself from the regular coordinates of time and space. The whole thing effectively happened backwards, synthesizing all the qualities variously inventorized in these chapters into a single summons.

I recently came across an interview with the Danish critic and curator Lars Bang Larsen.[5] In response to a closing query, 'Are you an idealist?', he replied: 'The question remains, how to combine idealism with the scepticism and self-reflection that turns it into an artistic tool rather than an end in itself?' Answering the question by issuing a further question (and a pointedly productive one at that) seems to me an exemplary response. The key parts of the present skeleton can be slotted into the structure of Larsen's anti-answer: the 'idealism' of the modern movement, the 'scepticism' against the dualistic thinking of form and content, the 'self-reflection' of self-reflexivity. Moreover, Eco's still-urgent imperative – that *form must be a way of thinking* – is latent in Larsen's call for a 'tool' rather than more commodities. In which case, the text that follows will ideally serve as a kind of all-purpose wrench; or perhaps a tuning fork, as we shall see.

[5] Lars Bang Larsen, 'Art is Norm', *Internationistisk Ideale*, no. 3, 2010, p. 13.




Richard Hamilton, *How a Great Daily Organ is Turned Out* (1990), composite print from 20 plates

# 1: FORM AS A WAY OF THINKING

This first theory chapter is foremost an overview of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*; a summary of its key ideas, and an expansion of those most relevant to the thesis at large. For Eco, 'authentic' art – by which he means timely, pertinent and exemplary – emerges when form is *a way of thinking* as opposed to a means of dressing already-held ideas. This, I argue, inevitably results in symbiotic form and content. Otherwise put, such symbiosis is a *consequence* of forming-as-thinking. I intend to articulate *and* demonstrate this idea here.

After briefly noting three pivotal aspects of Eco's book, I disambiguate a couple of recurring terms ('aesthetic', 'poetic'), then set up a rudimentary distinction between 'art' and 'design' in view of more convincingly merging them later on. Next, I compound Eco's sense of authentic by folding in a few commensurate concepts. The first is T.W. Adorno's account of the 'true' essay, itself based on a previous one by Georg Lukács. That I begin with a definition of 'essay' is no coincidence: it's at least partly intended to acknowledge my relatively haphazard approach – ranging freely across time, and referencing both seminal figures and close colleagues. Seth Price's ongoing essay-artwork *Dispersion* is offered as a recent case in point.

I move on to some related theories by Luigi Pareyson, Alain Badiou, and Walter Benjamin. Pareyson's notion of 'organic form' prioritizes *production* over representation or expression as art's essential 'forming action'. From this vantage, 'form' is synonymous with 'organism', every germane artwork inscribed with its own 'forming logic' (or 'life-force'), and the artist can be seen to proceed in a manner more or less faithful to this 'DNA'. Benjamin also advocates the primacy of production in his essay 'The Author as Producer', but to more explicitly social and political ends. Writers, he writes, ought not merely espouse a correct (i.e. Marxist) political alignment, but actively demonstrate a correct political *tendency* by actively working 'at the level of production', perpetually challenging orthodox forms of distribution. Both ideas chime with Alain Badiou's more recent notion of 'fidelity to an event', a promiscuous philosophical concept he applies across disciplines.

This leads on to the expansive aesthetic theory at the heart of *The Open Work*. Crudely put, Eco first describes a fundamental social dialectic in order to more clearly articulate an aesthetic equivalent. Namely: in the same manner that self-aware citizens reluctantly participate in society in view of transforming it, avant-garde artists necessarily engage with formal conventions in view of transforming *them*. This is as good as it gets, he concludes, and it's not that bad. Extending from this, the final idea elaborated from *The Open Work* here is that, *in a modern industrial context*, rather than focusing on, say, the decoration, representation or fictionalization of reality, progressive contemporary art operates *at the level of structure*, focusing on the *mechanisms* by which meaning is produced in a given discipline. Art turns self-conscious, and so self-reflexive.

Next, an interlude attempts to dissolve and arising contradiction. On one hand, I'm arguing for form that is 'intrinsically derived'; on the other, for form that is 'socially motivated'. But this is no paradox: the best work simply combines the two, an idea I demonstrate using one example from graphic design, and one from fine art – also in view of showing that the similarities between the two fields can be greater than the differences.

I end the chapter with a deeper consideration of the nature of this form/content synthesis, assembling previous attempts to deal with (or transcend) the duality by commentators such as Clement Greenberg and Susan Sontag. A quick synopsis of Bruno Latour's work serves as a postscript. Latour is similarly out to dissolve pernicious binary thinking (particularly the commonplace nature/culture divide), and it's instructive to consider the 'symbiosis' I continually advocate here in light of Latour's free-ranging sociology. This same strain runs throughout the present work: 'micro' aesthetic concerns are not only analogous to 'macro' ethical ones, but ideally *inform* them – and vice versa. In this back-and-forth between the world and the world of forms, we chase ways to handle the messy question of how to live.

## 1.1: KEY ASPECTS OF ‘THE OPEN WORK’

My interest in *The Open Work* is three-fold:

– First, because it is a prescient account of art that is left radically incomplete or indeterminate in terms of form or meaning, in order to be *worked out* – iterated, interpreted or completed – by either the artist or performers during its production, by the audience during its reception, or both.

In a founding survey that became the book’s opening chapter, ‘The Poetics of the Open Work’, Eco describes a number of recent pieces of avant-garde music by such as Stockhausen and Pousseur, whose scores are designed to foster some degree of improvisation during the performance. He then relates the literature of Kafka (whose narratives resist singular comprehension or interpretation), Joyce (whose *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are rife with multiple meanings, fragmentation, and cosmic chaos generally), and Mallarmé (whose unrealized *Livre* was an exercise in extreme multiplicity, conceived to be rearranged by the reader). He also acknowledges Calder’s kinetic mobiles (in perpetual motion and so without fixed composition) and the plays of Brecht’s Epic theatre (that typically relate a series of inconclusive facts for its audience to resolve).

In reaching back as far as Mallarmé, whose earliest seminal work dates from the 1860s, Eco suggests that the origins and development of open works are commensurate with modernist tendencies in art generally. He further points out that the essential ambiguity common to such an approach mirrors the vanguard theories of relativity, uncertainty, discontinuity and indeterminacy being explored by contemporaneous science, philosophy and mathematics. Art’s equivalent ‘openness’ is inevitable, he says, because

> the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear.[1]

In other words, tentative aesthetics plausibly reflect tentative experience. (More on this later.)

– Second, because *The Open Work* is itself a prime example of the work it advocates. The short inaugural ‘Poetics’ piece spawned a number of offshoot essays written for various Italian journals and eventually assembled into a single volume. The book was republished several times, and on each occasion reconfigured – added to, amended, prefaced, and so on. The eventual English edition (1989) followed suit, incorporating, among other bits and pieces, some of Eco’s later writing in order to emphasize the link between this early aesthetic theory and his more renowned work in semiology. As a modest palimpsest, then, the assembly of the book mirrors its argument, embodying why such a rolling snowball of thought is both timely and pertinent: self-critical, discursive, flexible, open-minded.

While I realize that this is by no means unusual or unique, i.e. that writing or any other artistic act almost always involves some kind of working-itself-out by some form of thinking-in-action, to forge a concrete opinion or more ineffable aesthetic – in both cases, a *gesture* – along the way, I claim only that *The Open Work* is *to an unusual degree both* about and an example of this process; subject and object are one and the same. It practices what it preaches, and is all the more convincing for doing so.

– Third, *The Open Work* is foundational for me because of the way in which Eco explicitly and convincingly accounts for what he calls the ‘authenticity’ of such Open Work by reverse-engineering an aesthetic theory to support his case. Eco’s ‘authentic’ means something like ‘timely pertinence’. He argues that the only truly apposite work is that which struggles half-blindly against impotent formal conventions and, in doing so, generates newly relevant ones. This is, of course, the definitive vocation

[1] Eco, op. cit., p. 157.

of any artistic avant-garde,[2] not to be mistaken for adolescent posturing (killing fathers for the sake of killing fathers) but more righteously conceived as an attempt to supersede forms that have lost or are losing their perceptive and affective power.

For Eco, the work that emerges from this struggle is exemplary to the extent that it fosters our ability to cognitively apprehend the current cultural condition, ideally in view of positively affecting it. The question of aesthetic authenticity is therefore a question of *more or less* appropriately and so *more or less* meaningfully refracting lived experience by working on forms. The middle third of the present chapter summarizes this aesthetic theory, as a foundation on which to build the rest of the thesis.

But first, some upfront clarifications:

## 1.2: GLOSSARY: AESTHETIC, POETIC, ART, DESIGN

Eco's assertion that 'form must be a way of thinking' is an *aesthetic principle* constituent of a *poetics*. These terms require a little elaboration.

By 'aesthetic', I mean the form by which an idea is communicated graphically or verbally, how it *comes across.* This is consistent with Eco's use of the term, as clarified by David Robey in his introduction to the English edition. Robey notes that much of the book is founded on Eco's 'general aesthetic theory',[3] which is, in turn, an extension of his mentor Luigi Pareyson's notion of 'organic form' (particularly his insistence that it is the *modo di formare* – the 'way of forming' – that constitutes the aesthetic essence of an artwork). Eco stresses this *active* aspect of 'aesthetic', synonymous with Nicholas Bourriaud's definition of style as 'the movement of a work, its trajectory'.[4] Robey also draws attention to Eco's use of the term 'aesthetic idiolect', which is especially telling inasmuch as 'idiolect' means 'an individual's speech pattern', and so implies a kind of *native* particularity – a subjective sensibility or temperament.

Trailing Eco again, by 'poetics' I mean a set of more or less explicit intentions, a drive, approach or attitude. This is derived from *poetica*, 'a work's artistic purpose', and conceived of as a conscious means, a plan of action or set of working principles (as in Aristotle's *Poetics*: 'a treatise or collection of notes') towards an anticipated end – even though that 'end' may be indeterminate, vague or abstract. Certainly the 'purpose' of artistic work is ambiguous in Eco's account, inasmuch as he advocates a necessary and desirable 'blindness' rather than a projected outcome. In other words, Eco's sense of purpose is markedly front-loaded – a drive, push or reach, more diving board than landing pad. It is thus better conceived of as purpos*ive*, which is to say in view of a nominal end congruent with Kant's well-known description of nature's design as 'purposiveness without purpose'; form that suggests *some kind of utility*, however phantom.[5]

'An aesthetic principle constituent of a poetics' is thus conceived as the program that determines how form takes shape in its appeal to the senses. This implies a value judgment: at least a critical measure (what makes for 'good work'?), at most an ethical code (what sort of 'good' does this work do?).

[2] Given that the term is two or three times *passé* today, I'll generally avoid 'avant-garde', apart from when referring to or quoting someone else's use in a more innocent context. Eco uses it without any such hesitation, though in a later article on 'The Death of the Gruppo '63' (chapter 9 in the English edition of *The Open Work*) he wrote: 'now that Samuel Beckett has had the Stockholm treatment, the word "Avant-garde" can hardly keep its meaning.' That said, I always mean to at least *imply* a contemporary avant-garde, which is to say I agree with Eco's assertion that authentic work is necessarily – if often inadvertently – topical, that it manifests the zeitgeist, etc.

[3] Eco, op. cit., p. xiii.

[4] Bourriaud's line is itself a variation on a maxim proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: 'The style of a thought is its movement.' See: Bourriaud, op. cit., p. 114.

[5] Given that fine art since, say, Duchamp is a fundamentally ambiguous occupation anyway, this tenuous sense is already implied in that qualifying 'artistic' of 'artistic purpose'.

A further signal appeal of *The Open Work* is precisely that it alludes to a general 'work' rather than the end product of a specific discipline – and by implication, a polymathic *working ethos*. In this sense too, then, Eco's thesis is itself conspicuously 'open' from the outset. Although the present text sets out from aesthetic theory, it deliberately circumscribes influences and examples from across the liberal arts. In doing so, I mean to show that the working ethos I'm after grasping applies across disciplines – in my particular case, to design as much as art. Even though art and design traditionally proceed from different premises, this approach is commensurably manifest in the products of both practices.

As mentioned, Eco spends a large part of *The Open Work* making a case for the 'authenticity' of avant-garde art. The nearest semantic neighbours from a century of design discourse tend to be even more vague and insipid ('good', 'honest', 'unaffected'), but graphic design can be conceived of as more or less authentic in a sense wholly consistent with Eco's articulation, and in due course I'll be as precise about what makes this 'good' good as Eco is in authenticating his 'authentic'. For now, it's enough to say that I consider design a kind of socialized art, and though I'll later posit that the working ethos I want to articulate is particularly apparent in the grey area *between* art and design, it's worth acknowledging some rudimentary distinctions at the outset in order to know exactly what's being merged. To paraphrase British art critic J.J. Charlesworth, cross-disciplinarity is meaningless without reference to a primary set of discrete disciplinary foundations.[6] That said, bear in mind when reading the following two paragraphs that I'm temporarily attempting to keep the fields at arm's length primarily for the sake of clarity at the outset.[7] I'll proceed by tentative distinction rather than hard definition.

Fundamentally, both art and design involve the manipulation of sensory phenomena. From there they diverge:

Relatively speaking, art *tends towards* the speculative creation of new forms, and is thus founded on more or less indefinite intentions and outcomes (though often produced for specific audiences, clients, spaces and contexts). It is typically autonomous, meaning without *ostensible* purpose in the obvious sense, and strongly marked by a relatively long tradition of history and theory (i.e. Art History) that typically remains focused on the singular, 'auratic' art object, latterly supplemented by broader immaterial concepts, experiences and relations. The domain is relatively hermetic and remains foremost associated with subjectivity, catharsis, poetry, etc.

Graphic design, on the other hand, *tends towards* the meaningful rearrangement of existing forms, founded on more or less definite intentions and outcomes, generally produced for specific audiences, clients, spaces, and contexts. It is typically tied to commerce (i.e. the serial or mass production of goods and services). As such, it has a relatively short history, beginning only around the end of the industrial revolution, and so lacks the sustained intellectual inheritance of Art History. Due to its ties with industry, graphic design has tended to be more immediately and emphatically affected by vanguard technologies. The domain is *comparatively* 'social', and more closely associated with objectivity, functionality, science, etc.

So when I say design can be conceived of as a 'socialized art', I mean only that it is oriented more towards reception than creation. But let's not get hung up on definitions. (To paraphrase 'cabinetmaker, designer, poet, and teacher' Norman Potter, people often seem to be far more concerned with their job title than what they actually do.)

[6] J.J. Charlesworth, 'Crisis at the ICA: Ekow Eshun's Experiment in Deinstitutionalisation', *Mute*, vol. 2, no. 15, 2010.

[7] In his 2007 essay 'The Surface of Design', Jacques Rancière draws a useful comparison between the poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the industrial designer Peter Behrens. Rancière thinks the distinction between fine and applied art has been historically exaggerated; more pointedly, he says, both work on 'surfaces' in the general public domain of 'sensibility'. See: Jacques Rancière, 'The Surface of Design', *The Future of the Image* [2003, French] (London: Verso, 2007).

## 1.3: THE 'TRUE' ESSAY

*The Open Work* describes, embodies and promotes a positively precarious disposition, which is as decent a definition as any of the essay form as such. Essay literally means 'attempt', which implies reaching beyond one's knowledge, understanding or ability, and, to a slightly lesser degree, a making-it-up-as-you-go-along. It is thus distinct from the journalistic article, report or profile, which are all essentially narrative accumulations of facts. (Naturally, the categories aren't watertight.)

According to T.W. Adorno's essay 'The Essay as Form' (1958),[8] itself based on Georg Lukács' 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay' (1910),[9] an essay is never started from scratch or written in a vacuum. Rather, it assimilates existing material, drawing together 'culturally pre-determined objects' that through the act of writing are reconfigured and transformed into a new entity. According to Adorno, the success of this compound – the essay's plausibility and authority – hinges on how convincingly its constituent parts hang together, the extent to which they are mutually supportive. The effective essay thus *forges its own logic* and then *corresponds to it*. For Lukács, this amounts to writing into existence a 'truth' inasmuch as it expresses a 'newly-formed essence' without prior equivalent.

Adorno expands: the 'true' essayist never aims at abstract absolutes, but remains grounded in concrete contingencies. 'Not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory … rather, to make the transitory eternal.' This freewheeling spirit, he continues, originated in Kant, who supplanted Western philosophy's strictures of verbal definition, a sedimentary process ('One can only seek truth if one discovers fundamental principles and builds on them'[10]), with a *line of inquiry*, a *trajectory of thought*. Kant's *Critiques* ushered in the spirit of critical reason, an unprecedentedly self-conscious paradigm that, contrary to the staunch scientific attitude that insists stubbornly on 'the pre-critical job of definition', sought 'an understanding of concepts as part of the process in which they are temporarily embodied.'[11] And precisely because this undertaking is always in the midst of things, it is necessarily incomplete, and so always 'at risk'. Adorno summarizes:

> Just as [empirical education] remains exposed to error, so does the essay as form; it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security, a lack which the norm of established thought fears like death (...) It is not so much that the essay ignores indisputable certainty, as that it abrogates the ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress.[12]

Moreoever, he writes, the path of such progress is mysteriously 'hidden to the essay itself', and this desire to make sense – quite literally to build meaning – its driving force. The *essayer* thus pursues the looping logic of 'autopoiesis', which means self-generating, self-sustaining. In writing this newly peculiar sense into existence, the essayist as exemplary Open Worker labours to crystallize those mutually supporting parts. According to Adorno, this 'expresses the utopian intention' by alluding to a social equivalent; namely, the notion of a mutually supportive community, of communality.

Writing some 40 years on from Eco in one of the multiple (and conspicuously open) iterations of his essay-artwork 'Dispersion' since 2002, contemporary New York-based artist Seth Price makes much the same claim – or excuse – as Eco, that

[8] T.W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form' [1958, German], *New German Critique*, no. 32, Spring/Summer, 1984.

[9] Georg Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper' [1910, German], *Soul and Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).

[10] Jack M. Balkin quoted in: Céline Condorelli, *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), p. 21, fn. 17.

[11] Both Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', op. cit.

[12] Ibid., p. 161 (my italics).

> since one can only adopt the degree of precision appropriate to the subject, this essay is written in a provisional and exploratory spirit [and as such] may itself be a disjointed series of naive propositions lacking a thesis.[13]

Since the late 1990s, Price has worked across the entire spectrum of contemporary art, often producing works that are emphatically analogue or emphatically digital, and tend to inscribe their particular moment in media history. One typically self-consciously 'signature' series comprises vacuum-formed wall pieces that fossilize in plastic some piece of clothing from a distinct moment in fashion (e.g. a 1980s bomber jacket) alongside the artist's name. Price has also produced films, videos, paintings, records, mixtapes, clothing, books, and other printed matter.

'Dispersion' has been dispersed in numerous formats – published as a printed booklet, channelled via numerous other books and magazines, and circulating as a freely downloadable PDF. In it, Price proposes ways of working outside the circumscribed confines of the art world by focusing on (or at least prioritizing) forms of distribution over forms of production. He posits that *how* a piece of work circulates can be as important as *what* circulates, and that in a saturated and neutered art system based on commodity exchange, this How is a more potent point of focus right now. 'The art system usually corrals errant works,' he states, 'but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?'[14]

Because Price also produces high-profile commodity-artworks himself, 'Dispersion' has since served, perhaps inadvertently, as a de facto manifesto – 'a stand-in for the artist himself', according to critic Tim Griffin, who also notes that Price's work is then obliged to measure up to his own public call for constructive ways of operating outside the critical mass.[15] This idea of a self-imposed mandate seems a commendably awkward way of raising the stakes against oneself: *can I answer to my own critique?*

Where Eco wrote in praise of openness over fixity in *The Open Work*, Price now champions slowness over speed. Slow art, he says, 'works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements' based on the contemporary mandate of *don't stop don't stop don't stop*. He recalls the rear-guard tactics of Duchamp, who famously cultivated the property of 'delay' via a series of enigmatic deferrals designed to 'return the investment with massive interest.' Price seeks analogous brakes in the backwaters of communication that could circumvent the dominant circuit of an art market that reflexively absorbs and domesticates any sting of topicality.[16] 'Moving *with* the times places you in a blind spot', he continues, because 'if you're part of the general tenor it's hard to add a dissonant note.' This general tenor was once disparaged as 'scene art' by Clement Greenberg, who meant work that merely goes through whatever motions are currently in vogue. Considering that Price's very portable document format seems to have been widely read – and influential – in the decade since its release, and so at the very least against the general tenor of the glut of art writing that disappears without impact, 'Dispersion' can also be seen as duplicating *The Open Work* in that it likewise performs its point.

Something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, then, Price's essay has proliferated not only in terms of numbers and circulation, but also across his larger body of work. Bits and pieces of the palimpsest have been variously silkscreened onto those vacuum-formed wall pieces, or written into the narrative of his video lecture *Redistribution*.[17] Considered as a whole, in fact, Price's practice is markedly essayistic.

[13] Seth Price, 'Dispersion', 2001–, http://www.distributedhistory.com (unpaginated).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Tim Griffin, 'The Personal Effects of Seth Price', *Artforum*, Summer 2008.

[16] The examples in 'Dispersion' include a hypothetical science fiction novel as briefly postulated in the short-lived art theory journal *The Fox*, mixtape cassettes such as those circulated as works by Price himself, and Jorge Pardo's own-home-as-exhibition, *4166 Sea View Lane* as a singular instance of a genuinely *heterotopic* artwork, simultaneously open *and* closed to the public while pointing to the paradox.

[17] See §7.6.

Dispersion can be considered an update of *The Open Work* in one further sense: in frankly surveying the contemporary scene, both works attempt to articulate it in order to move; in order to supersede it.

## 1.4: THE ETHICS OF ORGANIC ART

As distinct from science, mathematics and philosophy, writes Eco, art specifically 'knows the world through its own formative structures'. It can be thus considered 'intelligence in form'[18] – an intelligence that participates in the world (interprets it, affects it) by arranging and organizing those forms. Eco's thinking here derives from – and extends – his mentor Luigi Pareyson's theory of 'formativity' outlined in the seventh chapter of *The Open Work*, 'Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson's Aesthetics'. It opens with this abstract:

> To the idealistic notion of art as vision, Pareyson's theory of formativity opposes the concept of art as *form*, in which the term 'form' means organism, formed physicality with a life of its own, harmoniously balanced and governed by its own laws; and to the concept of *expression*, it opposes that of *production* as forming action.[19]

The 'idealistic notion of art as vision' in the opening clause refers to the concept of 'pure intuition' contemporaneously popularized by Benedetto Croce in his 1912 lecture series and later publication, *The Essence of Aesthetic*.[20] Croce unequivocally posits internal subjective 'feeling' as the essence of art, which by implication has nothing to do with morality or knowledge, and so is categorically devoid of any social impetus or obligation. (Significantly, perhaps, this conception was dominant in Italy throughout the Fascist period.)

Contra Croce, then, Eco assumes the task of elucidating the obscure ethics inherent in Pareyson's 'formativity'. Morality is entwined with artistic action, he writes, not as a set of binding laws, but as a commitment, an attitude, a mission. Duty compels the duly committed artist to pursue the guiding principles suggested by an initial 'cue' or 'germ' of an idea, which is gradually realized in a piece of work as it becomes progressively autonomous.[21] This cue or germ – a good idea in advance of its realization, or aesthetic precognition – is 'the pretext, the goal, the lure, which engages consciousness in formal processes of transformation.'[22] This is the sense in which every piece of work is 'self-governing', which in turn implies a cybernetic process of trial-and-error, 'from the vague realm of aspiration to a concrete awareness of the possibilities of the material at his disposal.'[23]

In a conversational struggle to distinguish between mere 'illustration' (i.e. hackwork) and superior 'invention' (i.e. art), Francis Bacon once described this 'life' as characterized by minimal caution and surplus instinct:

> What has never yet been analysed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. It lives on its own like the image one's

[18] Eco, op. cit., p. 144.

[19] Ibid., p. 158.

[20] Ibid., p. ix, fn. 2.

[21] 'Autonomous' here meaning 'that which is free, but gives a law to itself', a definition drawn from: Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 70.

[22] Susan Sontag, 'On Style', *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 33–4.

[23] Ibid.

> trying to trap; it lives on its own and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly.[24]

This is key: both the object-under-scrutiny and the subject-of-capture are equivalent, sovereign entities, and both are marked by blatant idiosyncrasy.

It follows from all this that, in Pareyson's view, the artist ought not be conceived as a genius-seer who summons fully formed revelations, but a producer who realizes-in-action. The same idea was advocated around the same time by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Author as Producer' (1936), and later elaborated with endless nuance in T.W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (posthumously published in 1970). For Benjamin and Adorno, as for Pareyson and Eco, artistic creation is not merely or primarily a mental phenomenon conjured in the mind of the maker, but rather a plastic process in which a given medium is acted upon, manipulated and transformed. This is by no means an arbitrary procedure; on the contrary, it requires a *correct* response to the unfolding work – and here is the first inkling of the 'ethics' that underpin Eco's conception of authenticity.

The development of any piece of work obviously involves making choices – a platitude that art historian Thierry de Duve has formulated as follows: 'If the word art means making, and if making means choosing, then we are left to draw the most general conclusion possible: art means choosing.'[25] De Duve is in fact paraphrasing Marcel Duchamp, who, in a conversation about his readymades, proclaimed that

> The word 'art', etymologically speaking, means to make (...) Now what is making? Making something is choosing a tube of blue, a tube of red (...) choosing the place to put it on the canvas, it's always choosing (...) Choice is the main thing, even in normal painting.[26]

The choice implied by Pareyson, however, is not simply synonymous with 'preference', which implies something subjective and superfluous. Crucially, it *derives from* the work-in-progress. This kind of 'choice' is integral, ingrained, and so in some sense pre-ordained. Hence the decisions made along the way of the work can be plausibly conceived of as more or less *faithful* to principles immanent in the emerging work.

Pareyson calls it 'formativity,' and the idea is analogous to what contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou calls 'fidelity to the event'. The 'event' in this case is, again, something like the founding 'germ', 'cue', or 'intuition' of an idea in advance of its realization as a piece of work. According to Badiou's very particular ontology, as set out in such as *Being and Event* (1988),[27] philosophical thinking 'assembles truth' relative to one of four fundamental 'conditions': Science, Politics, Love, and Art. Philosophy is thus conceived as a meta-domain that only exists in counterpoint to these conditions, and the sole means of refracting their respective truths is by *reflecting on* them via what he calls 'truth procedures'. Crucially, these procedures are always timely and specific. Truth is gleaned in action and never hoarded into doctrine – an emphatically non-axiomatic philosophy.

Moreover, each of Badiou's four conditions manifests a discrete and specific *type* of truth which – to continue using his terms – is revealed only when an 'event' ruptures an otherwise indiscernible situation, and this rupture is pointed at (or 'named'). In other words, when someone or something registers an unprecedented way of perceiving the world, and so instigates a *potential* paradigm shift in terms of how we think about things. These events occur at all levels, from minor quotidian happenings to major structural shifts, both personal (a love affair) and public (a social revolution). The determining

[24] Quoted in: Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2010), p. 79.

[25] Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 162.

[26] Ibid., p. 161.

[27] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* [1988, French] (New York: Continuum, 2005).

factor is simply that the event exceeds existing value systems; there is no way to immediately judge, contain or otherwise 'domesticate' it. And precisely because such an event is no longer commensurate with any existing measure, it may be pursued with greater or lesser fidelity relative only to itself – that is, to the essence of the original rupture.

Badiou discusses the 'truth procedures' specific to the Art condition in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (1988). 'Inaesthetic' is his term for the true art event inasmuch as it contradicts existing aesthetic conventions, something like 'an unprecedented creative idea'.[28] It bears repeating that for Badiou the truth procedure is always strictly *a* procedure – which is to say a one-off, occurring in the moment and contingent on the specifics of a given situation. (Badiou calls it 'generic'.) Hence it is futile to conceive of a general rule to *validate* the fidelity; it is possible only to sketch an overarching concept as a frame through which to consider each new case.[29]

Both Badiou's fidelity-to-an-event and Pareyson's organic formativity conjure the promiscuous metaphor of DNA, obligatory shorthand for all contemporary phenomena involving some kind of immanent anticipatory code. To discover the *legitimate* form of a given piece of work is to properly realize a trajectory according to a sovereign law that is *already inscribed* – a law that guides and validates those decisions made by the duly attuned artist along the way. Consider this in light of the following definition of ethics by the German critic Jan Verwoert:

> [While] Morals are the set of values which a society and those who rule it declare to be binding for all that live in that society (...) Ethics is about the attitude to life that is immanent to – and manifests itself through – the particular way people live their life. Your ethical principles reveal themselves in the particular style of how you go about what you do. In art and intellectual discourse, style is ethos and ethos style.[30]

As an active Marxist, Walter Benjamin was committed to the notion that the technologies of manufacture – the 'means of production' – ought to be owned by the people who operate them. In 'The Author as Producer' (1934),[31] rather than the usual focus on factories and workers, he considers the same idea in view of a socially committed art. Writing and the other arts, he writes, are always grounded in social structures such as educational institutions and publishing networks, and though the socially-conscious and politically-engaged intellectual may query how his (or anyone else's) work stands in relation *to* these structures, this is not enough; he needs to query rather how it stands *in* them. Benjamin demands that intellectuals refrain from merely adopting political 'content' and propagating an ideological cause, and instead work to transform *the root-level means by which their work is produced and circulated.* This approach, he concludes, will inevitably manifest what he deems to be a 'correct' political tendency.

Benjamin's first case study in 'The Author as Producer' is the Soviet writer Sergei Tretiakov, who lived and worked on an agricultural commune for extended periods before writing his experiences up into a novel. He is offered as an exemplary 'operative writer', who actively implicated himself in the matter at hand, as opposed to the common hack who merely observes and 'gives information'.

[28] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* [1998, French] (Stanford University Press, 2004).

[29] Similarly, Kant claims that the artist 'does not himself know how the ideas for [the work] have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically, and communicate the same to others in such precepts as would put them in a position to produce similar products.' For Kant, the 'rule' that verifies art 'cannot be set down in a formula [...] for then the judgment upon the beautiful would be determinable according to concepts. Rather the rule must be gathered from the performance, i.e. from the product [...] a model [...] not for imitation but for following.' Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* [1790] (Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 171.

[30] Jan Verwoert, 'Politics Must be Invented', *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 103.

[31] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' [1934, German], *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969).

Benjamin's preferred example, though, is his immediate contemporary and colleague, Bertolt Brecht, who subverted orthodox drama by way of his Epic Theatre's celebrated 'distancing' effects – leaving the lights on, allowing the audience to smoke, renouncing expository narrative and instead presenting a series of objective situations in order that spectators draw their own conclusions. Via these and other manipulations of technique, Brecht transformed 'the functional relation between cast and audience, text and production, director and actor.'

Necessarily leading by his own and others' example, then, Benjamin urges artists to reconsider their role away from prevailing norms, job descriptions, professional conventions, and outside expectations generally. What *might* the work of a constructively minded 'writer' involve? Are the abilities to distill an opinion and turn a phrase adequately deployed via the regular mediums, like (say) newspaper columns, books, journals and pamphlets – or might they be more usefully channelled through writing (say) captions to photographs, scripts for plays, or screenplays for movies; or indeed by renouncing writing altogether and taking up photography instead? Hence the essay's title, 'The Author as Producer' is also its proposition – that the writer should be less a hemmed-in author and more a free-ranging producer, closing the divide between her 'intellectual' and 'material' activities.

## 1.5: THE OPEN WORK'S AESTHETIC THEORY: ART AS A KIND OF SOCIAL WORK

The sixth chapter of *The Open Work* is called 'Form as Social Commitment', a title that promises an answer to a question which, for the time being at least, ought to be read with automatic scare quotes: *In what sense exactly might form be said to 'commit' itself 'socially'?*

I say this only because I more readily concur with contemporary Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie, who says that 'social engagement within art today is more often than not a form of *trompe l'oeil*.'[32] Still, the aim here is to drive for convincing responses to these questions without being cynical, pretentious, or deluded.

The question could be slightly elaborated thus: *What is the actual relationship between working in aesthetics and positively affecting the community-at-large?* Or again, abiding my own vested interests: *What does a genuinely socially constructive art or design or hybrid practice look like in the second decade of the 21st century?*

Eco was originally commissioned in 1962 to write the piece that became '*Il modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà*' (literally, 'The Way of Forming as Commitment to Reality') for two special issues of the Italian journal *Il Menabó* ('Dummy', in the sense of a model, template or blueprint) on the relationship between literature and industry. Eco used the opportunity to assemble an aesthetic theory to underpin his earlier survey of Open Works, and so too the book that eventually incorporated both pieces.

The resulting essay, 'Form as Social Commitment', articulates what David Robey sums up as the avant-garde's 'special political function'. Eco was, however, careful to point out that in the formula proposed by his theory, art 'understands but doesn't remedy' and should be considered political only to the limited extent that *aesthetic practice prioritizes gesture over action*. In other words, it works, consciously or not, to render visible what might otherwise remain invisible and possibly pernicious. The extent to which the products of Eco's approach can be deemed 'progressive' – or simply 'good work' – in a broader ethical or social sense is therefore according to their capacity to

[32] Lucy McKenzie, *Chêne de Weekend* (Cologne: Walther König, 2009), p. 12. The idea in context: 'I do not wish for Victorian values; I merely propose that the independent artist need not necessarily be a global nomad bureaucrat. Rather something closer to the classical artisan, but one who nevertheless creates their own language, relationship to commerce and self-definition. Social engagement within contemporary art is itself a form of *trompe l'oeil*. I admit that my position in this is unclear, appropriate under one set of criteria and questionable under another. I currently enjoy work simultaneously as an independent contractor for hire and as a fine artist in the normal habitat.'

> provide our imagination with schemes without which we might not be able to understand a large part of our technical and scientific activity – which would then really become alien to us, and assume control over our lives.[33]

Eco's thus formulates a value judgment. The approach he advocates is by no means the only way that what goes under the name of 'art' is made, nor the most frequent, but, according to his measure of *usefully apprehending the world*, the only *meaningful* one. Crudely put, we understand our environment exclusively through our perception of it, and we perceive exclusively through forms (strictly speaking, all visible matter). It follows that we can only *perceive the world adequately* by constantly advancing new ways of forming *equivalent to it*. Otherwise, we have no means to appropriately apprehend the ever-changing social environment.

'Form as Social Commitment' comprises two parts. Eco diagnoses a fundamental social dialectic in the first in order to articulate an aesthetic equivalent in the second. Together they support his claim for the particular pertinence of Open Works from the vantage of 1962, though the theory is expansive enough to ratify the authenticity of art in any era. Let's summarize these two dialectical movements by moving, with Eco, from the general to the specific.

**(a) Social dialectic: the necessary back and forth with the world**

Eco begins by noting the then-current vogue of the word 'alienation', which propels a long rumination on how its original meaning has shifted over time to something approaching the opposite. Specifically, he considers Hegel's use of the word in the first half of the 19th century via Marx's critique of Hegel in the second. In doing so he diagnoses two contradictory senses of 'alienation' entwined in modern usage – and so too a paradox lived in our daily experience.

Hegel's sense of 'alienation', he says, denotes a positive objectification, in which a person identifies with an object or situation and so *becomes one with it* in order to effectively use or engage it. Conversely, Marx's version refers to a negative dissolution in which one loses oneself in the same process and *is perniciously acted upon* as the object or situation takes control.

And in his meta-reading of both, Eco wonders – through Marx's eyes – how Hegel could have been so naive. He concludes that from the vantage of Marx's epoch, dominated by an industrialization that was barely underway during Hegel's, the consequences of alienation had become immeasurably more pronounced; that's to say, increasingly complex and with myriad knock-on effects. The semantic slide from a positive to a negative sense of 'alienation' can thus be simply seen as reflecting this change in kind. Where Hegel innocently conceived of alienation in terms of, say, becoming one with a spade in order to extend the body's capabilities, Marx had since witnessed the mature consequences of such 'prosthetics' once developed into machines, then factories of machines where people were not just usefully alienated into objects as before, but now perniciously alienated into entire systems – and consequently from the products of their labour.

Crucially, Eco's overview is neither positive nor negative. He *transcends* the Hegel-good/Marx-bad dichotomy, surmising that the situation is incontrovertibly dialectical and inevitable, with no possibility of escape. 'To modern man,' he writes, 'alienation is as much a given as weightlessness is to an astronaut'[34] – a foregone conclusion. Otherwise put, the vicious circle of alienation is tautologous with the human condition itself, and the only way to reasonably address the situation is by meeting it head-on, by participating in it. Not in order to 'conquer' it – which is impossible, futile – but to temporarily transcend it.

[33] Eco, op. cit., p. 157.

[34] Ibid., p. 136.

What's important here – the enlightened perspective according to Eco – is to never lose sight of the overall situation. Although alienation is irremediable, insurmountable, the choice to participate is at least a choice. Consequently, an individual's conception of social interaction is either deluded (that the forces of social alienation are absolutely hostile) or *aware* (that the situation is necessarily dialectical). And while this is an intellectual disposition, it has practical consequences: for Eco, only the appropriately aware individual has, if not the capacity to overcome then at least the capacity to consistently transform their situation – in which case they are never wholly disaffected. This is as good as it gets, Eco concludes with a shrug, and it's not that bad.[35]

He illustrates the point with the example of citizenship. An individual necessarily relinquishes his or her individuality in order to participate as a member of a social group (to whatever end, whether personal/selfish or communal/benevolent). In doing so, they are obliged to enter into any number of labyrinthine and more often than not malevolent social systems beyond their immediate control, i.e. all the familiar bugbears of the social contract. However, the situation is bearable and sustainable, he says, as long as he or she bears in mind that his or her dissolution is temporary, contingent, and generally a means to ultimately desirable longer-term or larger-scale ends, i.e. as long as he or she first realizes and then remembers to remember that it is both possible and inevitable that the communal citizen will flip back to sovereign individual.

The individual can thus resist being truly or totally alienated by merely maintaining awareness of this dialectic, which obtains at all levels of social relations – domestic, industrial and political. Admittedly, this point of view assumes a certain degree of social agency and latitude already, in the sense that it's hard to conceive how it might convincingly apply to the radically repressed or underprivileged. In his defence, Eco made it clear that he was writing specifically and explicitly from within, and about, a relatively advanced western milieu from the earnest vantage of the early 1960s.

All of which boils down to the trite truism that critical consciousness is a tool for psychic survival. The fact that it's trite doesn't stop it being true, or difficult to maintain, or useful to try to explicate here apropos of art.

In 'A Walk in Thin Air' (2010), a meditation on Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, curator and critic Dieter Roelstraete points out that contemporary art is precisely the domain where the free speculation of this critical consciousness occurs.[36] (Adorno called it 'the secularization of transcendence'.) Art is thus conceived as the *playground* of critical consciousness, where those with the benefit of Eco's enlightened perspective, the supposedly self-aware and non-deluded, go to get outside or above or beyond themselves – ideally depositing artistic gestures along the way. For Roelstraete, the meta-mascot of this place is the aloof protagonist of Caspar David Friedrich's über-Romantic 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*.



[35] Eco's resignation here recalls philosopher Richard Rorty's retort to critics of his outspoken relativism (the most notorious example being the idea that Nazism was only *relatively* evil – it all depends on your point of view) which involves his short-circuiting the charge that a given view can be dismissed as 'merely' relative by claiming all views are *a priori* relative. The unbeatable logic of this argument divides people into two groups: the congnoscenti who are aware that all is relative, and the dupes who are unaware and so extra-oppressed.

[36] Dieter Roelstraete, 'A Walk in Thin Air', *Dot Dot Dot* #20, 2010.

**(b) Aesthetic dialectic: the necessary conflict with formal conventions**

A few pages ago I outlined Eco's mentor Luigi Pareyson's concept of 'formativity', in which artworks are conceived as 'organisms' that are nurtured or 'worked out' during the process of production. I mentioned, too, that Pareyson's ideas were opposed to Benedetto Croce's notion of art as *vision*, yet Pareyson's theory itself remains in the abstract aether of idealist philosophy. Eco's goal in 'Form as Social Commitment' was thus to explicate Pareyson's concept – and the ethics implied – in view of more clearly materialist, applied ends.

According to Eco, the pseudo, false or *in*authentic art practice consists in merely rearranging existing forms. Through force of repetition and familiarity, the cognitive and communicative potential of aesthetic conventions inevitably weakens, their transformative power expires, and they harden into clichés. The result is irrelevant art, dead on arrival.

The literary critic Gabriel Josipovici has recently recounted, for instance, how early 20th-century writers conceived of the 19th-century narrative novel as perceptually inadequate. This conviction, he says, was less *thought* than *felt* – an intuition rather than an ideology. Those avant-gardists who 'feel at the level of form', he continues, sense that 'a certain language game can no longer be played',[37] that the old forms 'cannot really satisfy us, since they do not speak to our condition.'[38]

The art critic Robert Garnett describes the same moment. Long before theory, he writes, art 'senses' when a problem has become a false problem – that is, when it has become a 'critical' or 'academic' problem, at which point 'it's time to go elsewhere, to create new problems.'[39] Art knowingly problematizes in order to freshly perceive.

Eco's prime caricature of the conventional and so socially irrelevant artist is 'the man who writes the lyrics for Liberace' – a cipher for anyone who regurgitates slight variations on long-familiar tropes. Likewise, in a later chapter on poetry, he laments the situation in which the word 'September' invokes an immediate shortlist of rhyming words that immediately constrict the work's scope: remember, ember, November, December. Once-generative conventions (in this case the rhyming couplet) become rote templates and artistic straitjackets. Recalling the imperative of his social dialectic, 'as much a given as weightlessness is to an astronaut', Eco asserts that this aesthetic regression is similarly inevitable and unavoidable. His advice for how to deal with it is the same, too: first be aware of the fact, then stay on top of it.

The 'socially committed' artist in Eco's estimation is one who takes such artistic questions seriously,[40] in the sense that he or she worries over their work's *actual transformative impact in a given milieu*. They can therefore be considered 'truth-seeking' in the sense of chasing some verisimilitude to lived experience. This doesn't necessarily imply mimesis, analogy or allegory, only some sense in which *the work itself lives*. Stereotypes, conventions and orthodoxies, says Eco, confirm an established order of things. Such orderly form isn't a bad thing per se, but only valid – i.e. adequately perceptive and representative – in an accordingly orderly culture. In circumstances otherwise characterized by disorder, uncertainty, chaos and fragmentation, i.e. those that mark our modern world, so-called 'stable' forms are conspicuously false and so again inauthentic.[41]

[37] Josipovici, op. cit., p. 167.

[38] Ibid., p. 164.

[39] Robert Garnett, review of 'John Russell, Transmission Gallery, Glasgow', *frieze* no. 96, January/February 2006.

[40] (which isn't at all the same thing as those who make serious-seeming work; more often than not the opposite, in fact).

[41] Robey points out that Eco stops short at suggesting *how* (according to what measure, exactly) we might judge forms as past their expiration date, or, conversely, on what grounds we can conceive of artworks as adequately transformative. Eco admits upfront, however, that his only concern in *The Open Work* is to set out a general theory, not to use it to evaluate specific cases.

Eco is, however, alert to a double bind: namely, that 'it is impossible to describe a situation by means of a language that is not itself expressed by that situation'. In other words, whatever forms might conceivably qualify as *un*-conventional, anti-orthodox or counter-sentimental, and so constitute the sort of work Eco variously advocates as authentic, pertinent, and so on, cannot be generated in a vacuum. These exemplary forms must derive from the existing inventory too, as more or less drastic *modifications* to it, simply because that existing inventory is the very premise of communication, is what makes communication possible at all. All languages, including formal ones, are by definition sets of conventions and so categorically communal. So-called 'new' forms of communicating can therefore only ever be greater or lesser bastardizations of the old ones.

This is the bottom line of Eco's argument: the quality that distinguishes authentic from inauthentic forms – to be duly assembled into living, moving art – is the artist's ability *to actively, profoundly* transform *extant matter* rather than passively, superfluously rearrange it. In either case, the process is necessarily derivative, second-hand. This recalls Lukacs' description of the essay as always based on 'something already formed, or at best, with something that has been'. The *essayer*, he writes, 'gives a new order to such things as once lived', and, bound to them, 'must always speak "the truth" about them, find, that is, the expression for their essence.'[42]

Eco's aesthetic dialectic consists in this double bind, which is analogous to the insurmountable social one already described. First, the committed avant-garde artist participates in the world in order to truthfully 'describe' it. To this end she necessarily engages with the prevailing world of forms (what else could she do?) and so in terms of Hegel's dialectic, positively alienates herself *into* them. However, in perceiving these conventional modes as ineffectual, as read in terms of Marx's dialectic, the committed avant-garde artist becomes negatively alienated *from* them; at which point her proper response is to push, manipulate, pervert and distort those same conventions. In doing so she *newly communicates through the manner of that pushing*, trailing artworks in public as cognitive tools with which an audience might usefully apprehend, ideally comprehend, and ultimately *bend* contemporary conditions.[43]

Adorno similarly writes that moral attitudes are immanent in ways of working, best conceived of as 'ethical procedures' than 'moral pronouncements'.[44] A properly autonomous art is paradoxical, he says, inasmuch as it can be considered 'social' by virtue of its very opposition to society: 'By crystallizing in itself as *something unique to itself*, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful" it criticizes society by merely existing', therefore: 'What is *socially decisive* in artworks is *the content that becomes eloquent through the work's formal structures*'.[45] This is the sense in which art performs its obscure brand of 'social work', and Adorno stresses that there is no need to apologize for the lack of direct action. Artworks barely ever intervene politically in any direct sense, he says; their social effect is rather 'an extremely indirect participation in spirit that by way of subterranean processes contributes to social transformation'.[46] Such transformation of consciousness is no less practical for being barely apprehensible.

So where the social dialectic involves an inevitable back and forth with the world, the aesthetic equivalent involves an analogous struggle with the world *of forms*. This is the condition of modern art

[42] George Lukács quoted in: Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', op. cit., p. 151, fn. 2.

[43] Vladimir Nabokov puts it this way: 'What I feel to be the real modern world is the world the artist creates, his own mirage, which becomes a new *mir* ['world' in Russian] by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in.' Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* [1973] (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 112.

[44] See for instance the 'Society' section of: T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970, German], (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[45] Ibid., p. 230 (my italics).

[46] Ibid., p. 242 (my italics).

that, to repeat Eco's social resolve, is as good as it gets and not that bad. The artist Paul Chan recently summed up this 'speculative form of revelation' in a single word: spirit.[47]

It's worth adding that while this theory at least implies that the relative potency of forms follows a one-way process of dialectical progression, in convoluted practice their use-value tends to fluctuate. Used-up forms become recharged when clichés are potentially put to useful work *as* clichés, performed in new ways under new conditions. To paraphrase the archaeologist and art historian George Kubler, the situation is more knot than arrow.

But Eco's point is not to divide the world of forms into new and potent versus old and impotent, which would be to fall back into the pernicious obsession with hoarding definitions at the expense of fluctuating pragmatics. Like Adorno's sense of 'essay', he is rather oriented towards the empirical and specific rather than the abstract and general, concerned only to consider their efficacy in actual practice.

## 1.6: AUTHENTIC ART IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE – 'AT THE LEVEL OF STRUCTURE'

In *The Open Work*'s introductory 'Poetics' chapter, Eco had already described how authentic art mirrors dominant ways of perceiving the world, from the comparatively fixed, hierarchical conception of the cosmos in the Middle Ages, through the shift from tactile to visual that marked the comparatively 'Copernican' art of the Baroque era. By further contrast, the worldview of Eco's own Modern age is foremost determined by industrialization and characterized by instability. In a context dominated by mass-production, says Eco, art progressively transforms – and so authenticates – itself by operating *at the level of structure*, in an explicitly *machinic* manner, 'through the way it organizes its constituents rather than through what those constituents themselves represent.'[48]

Adorno concurs in *Aesthetic Theory* that, properly conceived, 'modern' art has nothing to do with chronology. 'Modern' does not simply mean the latest, newest thing; it refers (or ought to refer) rather to work in which 'the most progressive and differentiated technical procedures are saturated with the most progressive and differentiated experiences.' For Adorno, aesthetic procedures are 'critical' to the extent that they *duplicate* contemporaneous social ones, and to this end, truly modern works

> must show themselves to be the *equal* of high industrialism, *not simply make it a topic*. Their own comportment and formal language must react spontaneously to the objective formal situation.[49]

Take the previously mentioned 20th-century novelist who, on perceiving the conventional 19th-century romance to be an outdated, impotent format, focuses his attention away from the surface plot and towards its underlying mechanics. (Canonical examples here would include such as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).) The same vanguard sensibility in music resulted in equivalent developments 'at the level of structure', such as Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone system (in the 1920s) and, later, new ways of scoring compositions and performances (John Cage in the 1950s, Cornelius Cardew in the 1960s). In painting, the proto-modernist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Impressionism, Cubism etc.) became preoccupied with technique and structure to variously manifest the apparatus of perception, followed by the Abstract Expressionists' focus on the picture plane itself (from the 1940s on). Marcel Duchamp had already inaugurated the same shift in the

[47] 'This speculative form of revelation that unveils the seemingly inevitable course and consequence of a society progressing over time by virtue of an unending conflict that pits itself against its own best – which is to say, human – interests, has an illustrious name in the history of ideas. It is called spirit.' Paul Chan, 'The Spirit of Recession'. *October*, no. 129, Summer 2009, p. 6.

[48] Eco, op. cit., p. xiv.

[49] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit. For Adorno, art refracts social changes by way of what he says is a perennial paradox: 'a spontaneous reaction that is a norm'.

meta-medium of the art *system* as early as 1917 (with the *Fountain*). In all these cases, and many more that followed in their wake, the work is definitively centred on its *workings*.

Eco's key examples in *The Open Work* include the 'Aeolus' chapter in Joyce's *Ulysses* (which, set in the offices of a Dublin newspaper, is written in clipped journalese punctuated by headlines) and Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Eclipse* (which, set against the backdrop of the Italian stockmarket, involves listless characters who act in apparently random ways that mimic the unaccountable fluctuation of the economy). In these works, as in all Eco's other 'open' examples, formal technique duplicates subject matter, or vice versa, to the extent that structure and substance are indistinct.

In Badiou's view, too, modern art's 'events' are no longer achieved through representation, allegory or symbolism (as they have been potently in the past), but by transfiguring root-level operations – the 'technics' by which things are made manifest. In the *Handbook of Inaesthetics* he writes that the modern poem, for instance, is not merely 'a thought offered up in the flesh of language', but rather 'the set of operations whereby this thought comes to think itself.'[50] Again, this necessitates drawing attention to the given medium's *thought processes*, its *way of thinking*; and once again, too, the artwork is conceived as an organic, vitalist entity with a life of its own.

For Badiou, Mallarmé is archetypical of this specifically modern approach, the poet's signature self-reflexivity tautologous with poetry itself. A whole chapter of the *Handbook* is devoted to Mallarmé's 'Afternoon of a Faun', in which the protagonist faun contemplates chasing a couple of nymphets; meanwhile, at a more subterranean level of consciousness – which seems as obscure to the faun as it is to the reader – he simultaneously *chases the desire of the chase*, which is, in turn, analogous to the pursuit of the poem itself. What we might ordinarily identify as the poem's discrete form and content are here a single coefficient.

Otherwise put, 'Afternoon of a Faun' is only nominally about its ostensible subject matter, because Mallarmé isn't attempting to capture (represent) that subject matter as much as capture (freeze-frame) his own process of capturing. And this self-reflexivity can't be dismissed as gratuitous, or masturbatory, because the act of artistic capture *duplicates an equivalent theme of capture in the poem*. It serves a distinct function. Mallarmé is out to grasp 'the opposite of mimesis' because 'the poem surpasses … what the sensible is incapable of itself'. He's using form as a way of thinking.

It bears repeating that for Badiou this isn't merely an account of a certain type of self-reflexive art, but of modern art generally, with Mallarmé as a notably prescient example and influence. This is a backwards way of saying that all modern art is fundamentally self-reflexive, or at least that it is produced from within an unavoidably self-conscious milieu and hence any art that attempts some verisimilitude to lived experience is unavoidably marked by the fact. Or again: once self-consciousness is manifest in aesthetic practice, it is impossible to return *authentically* – without contrivance – to a prior state of relative innocence or ignorance. All subsequent authentic art must admit this premise, which Adorno called 'second reflection':

> It is the opposite of its usual philosophical concept (...) where reflection means burdening artworks down with intentions. Second reflection lays hold of the technical procedures, the language of the artwork in the broadest sense, but it aims at blindness.[51]

In contrast to traditional art, which was 'arranged and calculated', Adorno continues, 'new art accents the once hidden element of being something made, something produced'. And precisely because this work flaunts its production process, the product is necessarily unresolved – it precludes closure. Every

[50] Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, op. cit., p. 21.

[51] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit., p. 27.

such work, he says, ‘is virtually what Joyce declared *Finnegans Wake* to be before he published the whole: work in progress’.[52]

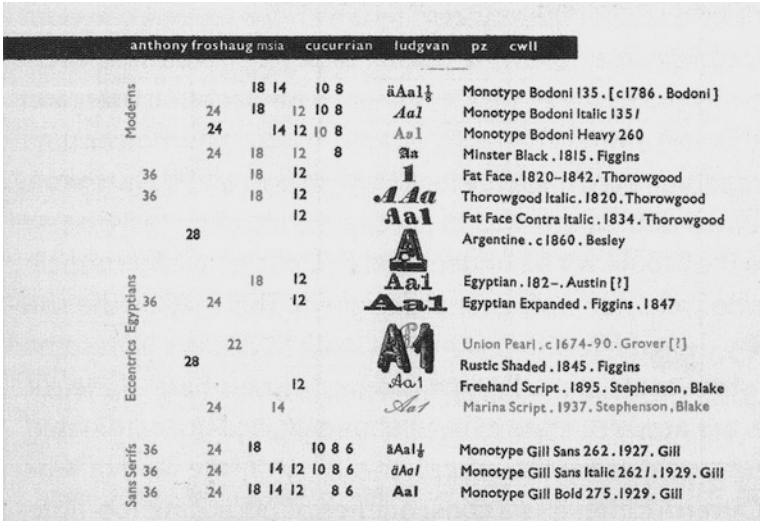
Inasmuch as it ‘registers’ the world rather than ‘makes pronouncements about it’, art approached with the sense of ‘social commitment’ described above will inevitably reflect the vanguard concerns of other fields. It’s therefore no coincidence, says Eco, that Open Works occur around the same time as the theory of relativity, the revolutionary worldview of which is expressed in other domains in terms such as ‘field’ in physics, ‘entanglement’ in quantum mechanics, ‘chaos’ in mathematics, and ‘possibility’ in philosophy. All describe new ways of conceiving cause-and-effect as a dynamic and complex process, rather than a rigid and unidirectional one; a worldview that emphasizes subjectivity, indeterminacy, and how context influences behaviour.

## 1.7: INTRINSIC AND SOCIAL – TWO CASE STUDIES

So far I’ve been pursuing, through the lens of Eco’s ideas, two apparently distinct and even seemingly contradictory lines of argument concerning what makes for what has been variously described as authentic, truthful or simply ‘good’ work: on one hand, the idea that such authenticity is *derived* from the intrinsic nature of a given piece of work, as is the case with Pareyson’s organic formativity, Badiou’s fidelity, vitalism, and all those concepts summarized by the metaphor of DNA immanent in a given piece of work; and on the other, that such authenticity is assembled relative to the particular social and historical context, as is the case in describing the dialectical back and forth with the world and the corollary world-of-forms.

In fact, these ideas are not mutually exclusive, but far more co-dependent (or, ironically, chicken-and-egg) than this DNA metaphor suggests, because that DNA is not, so to speak, ‘autonomous’, but itself equally determined by the social and historical situation. Adorno repeats the same dialectical refrain throughout *Aesthetic Theory*: the ‘dual nature’ of artworks as being simultaneously ‘autonomous structures’ and ‘social phenomena’.[53] This twofold character of art ‘severs itself from empirical reality and thereby from society’s functional context’ (= strives towards autonomy as a fully-formed thing-in-itself according to its own laws) yet is at the same time ‘part of empirical reality and society’s functional context’ (= grapples with extant conventions in view of their potent transformation and application).

The duality is tangled up with the distinction between art and design mentioned in §1.2. Let’s pause here to describe the nature of this knot (rather than try to untie it).

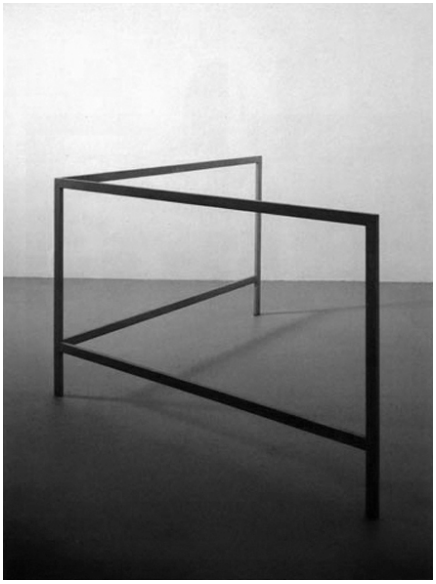



[52] Ibid., p. 26.

[53] Ibid., p. 248.

Representing ‘design’ for the sake of elaborating this distinction, consider this modest postcard-sized piece of work by the typographer Anthony Froshaug. It’s a sample chart, an inventory of metal type in his own workshop, printed to show what’s available and possible: a table of tools. The various elements are clearly configured according to their relational meaning; arranged, that is, according to a ‘logic’ immanent in the raw material, the information to be conveyed. Hierarchically, the types are grouped first according to historical style (the four categories set to read vertically up the left edge: Moderns, Egyptians, etc.), then, within these sets, listed roughly according to size from small to large, grouped in families (roman, italic, bold, etc.) and coloured black or red according to availability. The whole is organized around a central axis that proffers examples of each typeface (A’s, 1’s and, where available, fractions), with sizes-in-stock set in a matrix that runs off to the left and supplementary data (year designed, designer) to the right.

It’s plain to see, therefore, how the subject matter of the card (the material possibilities of a particular press) along with the card’s specific purpose (to show it as clearly and quickly in as small a space as possible) have determined what I propose we can therefore conceive of as an ‘authentic’ configuration – in the sense that it has been articulated ‘true’ to the intrinsic nature of the information, according to its relational meaning. However, this also means that the configuration functions in the first place according to the extrinsic, communal conventions of language.



And in (temporary) contradistinction, here’s a work of ‘art’ by Michelangelo Pistoletto called *Struttura per parlare in piedi* (*Structure for Talking While Standing*, 1965–66), one of a series of so-called ‘Minus Objects’, each of which was conceived as materially and conceptually distinct from the rest. Given that the objects’ sole shared quality was to be designated part of the group, the collective title is sardonically recursive: one of intentions of the series was to protest the market-friendly imperative to cultivate a signature style. An accompanying statement further explains that objects are conceived less as additions to the world-of-things and more subtractions from Pistoletto’s mind-of-ideas, hence the ‘minus’. The *Struttura* in particular is deliberately poised between sculpture and furniture, at once poetic and practical. Finally, the objects were initially exhibited crowded together in Pistoletto’s own studio, which further added to their ambiguous – indeed, open – status.

All told, I consider the *Struttura* a clear, even exaggerated, illustration of the struggle with prevailing artistic conventions (against the necessity of a signature style, of sculpture conceived as non-functional objects, of the aura of the gallery space, etc.). At the same time, such *extrinsic* ‘social’ gestures relating to the art historical situation are channelled through a piece of work assembled according to certain *intrinsic* formal reasoning just as decisive as that which governs the design of Froshaug’s card, such as the frame’s structure, scale, weight, and finish – all of which are rendered as minimally and efficiently as possible; which is to say, without surplus.

To elaborate: first, both works are naturally developed from an initial impulse. In the case of design we can call this a *brief*, and in the case of art an *insight*. In design, the 'generating logic' of a piece of work is thus *given* and *responsive*, supplied by a third party; namely, the job, situation or problem to be worked out (like Froshaug's card). In art, on the other hand, the equivalent 'generating logic' of a piece of work is not exactly given but something closer to *conjured* or *elicited*; that is, drawn from an idea or impulse originating in the artist himself (like Pistoletto's frame). Reasonably enough, we commonly consider the outcome of design as a more or less practical *solution to a brief*, and of art as a more or less metaphorical *articulation of an insight*.

That said, while work under the umbrella of design is habitually thought of as more subservient to external, 'objective' conditions, requirements and restrictions, a similar set of extrinsic forces are just as decisive in art – not issued as direct demands of a brief, but in response to a more obscure or covert sources, i.e. the dialectical development of forms relative to the trajectory of art history, as described earlier. And, mirroring this line of reasoning, while art is habitually thought of as derived from internal, 'subjective' impulses, intuitions and sublimations, a similar set of intrinsic forces are just as decisive in design, only in the less immediately obvious sense that communication necessarily involves *deriving* meaning from the pool of common sense, i.e. the shared conventions of language – whether verbal or graphic.

So where 'good' or 'authentic' design in the sense I want to argue for here (such as Froshaug's card) means fidelity to both the *content* (the willingness and ability to assimilate the particular demands of the material to be transformed, rendered legible and intelligible) and the *context* (mindful of audience and circumstances, and adjusted accordingly), a corollary 'good' or 'authentic' art alludes to an equivalent 'fidelity to content', which implies a readiness and ability to realize the formal potential of an idea or insight, and an equivalent 'fidelity to context', which implies being mindful of the actual effect of work on an audience in specific circumstances, including those of art history at any given point. In short, where in design content and context are *supplied* by a third party, in art they are voluntarily *mined*.

The less palpable point is that, as well as being by no means watertight, these distinctions aren't mutually exclusive either. It is in fact entirely possible (and desirable) to conceive of work that, while offering a functional solution to an external brief, also incorporates some sort of artful reflection. This is one reason I prefer to speak in terms of 'work' rather than art or design – because such labels carry presuppositions that serve to shut down the possibility of their productive confusion. These two pieces of work by Froshaug and Pistoletto exemplify this double condition: they are poetic *and* practical, and hence blueprints for the sort of work I'll be touting throughout the rest of my thesis.

By now it should be clear why the various 'generating logics' alluded to in this chapter presuppose a value judgement, a measure of relative validity. Any given piece of work develops more or less in accord with a design brief or artistic insight, or both, ideally sensitive to the specificity of the situation and alert to the work's likely effect; in which case, it can be deemed more or less *correct*.

## 1.8: SYNTHESIS: 'OPPOSITES GRASPED IN THEIR UNITY'

Now to the particular implication of all the above that I mean to draw out.

If Eco's chapter title 'Form as Social Commitment' implies the question, *In what sense exactly might form be said to 'commit' itself 'socially'?*, then an answer is inscribed in this fundamental aesthetic principle:

> the only meaningful way in which art can speak of man and his world is by organizing its forms in a particular way and not by making

> pronouncements with them. *Form must not be a vehicle for thought; it must be a way of thinking*.[54]

Logically speaking, it follows that the opposite approach, i.e. beginning with a relatively fixed end in mind, a 'statement' or 'message', then casting about for a form with which to pronounce, express or dress it, yields comparatively *closed* works. Eco never actually uses this counter-term himself; it is merely implied. But in the *threat* of closed work, at least, initial content and eventual form are conceived as discrete and so seemingly equivocal. In an open process, there is no 'initial' and 'eventual'; form and content are necessarily symbiotic, hence apparently inevitable and unequivocal.

When form is a way – a *means* – of thinking, it is fundamentally misleading to conceive of a distinct 'content', because form *as* thinking *is* content, a single entity, a tautology. This is where Eco's general aesthetic theory clearly aligns with and so supports his timely examples of Open Works. Form-as-thinking demands an open-minded disposition, because it involves setting up the conditions for work to 'play out' in practice. Possibilities are opened up (as opposed to statements being laid down), and Eco's exemplary Open Workers – Stockhausen, Joyce, Mallarmé, Calder, Brecht, and so on – are emblematic of this approach.

Writing on the 'necessity of formalism' in 1971, Clement Greenberg appears to support the same idea:

> Quality, aesthetic value, originates in inspiration, vision, 'content,' not in 'form ...'. Yet 'form' not only opens the way to inspiration; it can also act as a means to it; and technical preoccupations, when searching enough and compelled enough, can generate or discover 'content ...'. That 'content' cannot be separated from its form.[55]

Although written towards the end of his career and influence, this is congruent with Greenberg's earlier conception of modernist art published a decade earlier, the same year as Eco's 'Poetics'. There he famously classified 'Modernist Painting' as

> the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant ... the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.[56]

Greenberg's pointing to 'technical preoccupations' echoes Eco's account of artists operating 'at the level of structure'. 'In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience,' says Greenberg, 'the poet or artist turns upon the medium of his own craft'. The way in which a piece of work is made becomes its theme (or one of them); means become ends. Thierry de Duve formulates Greenberg's observations this way:

> The FORM of a work is what makes its SUBJECT MATTER visible and offers access to its CONTENT or QUALITY.[57]

This statement usefully departs from the lazy habit of conflating 'content' and 'subject matter'. Greenberg's 'subject matter' clearly refers to an ostensible topic or theme, while his 'content' is a less tangible sum of such prosaic parts. And yet his definition still falls short inasmuch as form can't be

[54] Eco, op. cit., p. 142 (my italics).

[55] Quoted in: De Duve, op. cit., pp. 209–10.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., p. 210.

written off as merely *offering access*, generating or discovering content. Form can also *constitute* content. Ultimately, it seems to me that any such attempt to dissemble art into discrete parts in this way hinders rather than helps our getting a useful grip on the matter, and is prone to distort the sort of deliberately ambiguous art works recounted by Eco (and exemplified above by Pistoletto's *Struttura*). Whether artist or audience, how to avoid this reflex tendency to bifurcate the two?

While Eco and Greenberg were writing primarily from the perspective of making art (despite not being makers themselves – at least not in a material sense), Susan Sontag wrote along similar lines from the point of view of *observing* it. In her 1965 essay 'On Style', she admonishes fellow critics who claim to renounce the supposedly passé distinction between a 'pure' content and its relatively 'superfluous' form (i.e. the view that considers style a mere *accessory* to substance), only to unconsciously practice such dichotomous thinking in their own work.[58] Such purportedly enlightened critics, she says, pay little more than lip service to the idea while seeming to consider themselves 'sufficiently protected by a theoretical disclaimer.'[59] In this way they flaunt a double standard constituent of an orthodoxy that's deep-rooted enough to undermine all good intentions. Decent theory succumbs to bad practice.

This orthodoxy derives, in turn, she continues, from wrong-headed assumptions concerning the relationship between art and morality. On the face of it, it seems reasonable enough to conceive of the appearance of a work as essentially subservient to some kind of naked, pre-formalized conception (in advance of being 'dressed', so to speak), and that the work is therefore 'about' a distinct subject, or that it 'represents' one. This notion suggests that the work's style, its formal manifestation, is merely the visible tip of a submerged 'content' which requires some sort of interpretation to get at what's concealed (with or without a critic's help). Keeping the iceberg in mind, we can consider this a *vertical* premise – that is, of style as a pejorative façade, surface as a superfluous afterthought.

However, Sontag firmly argues the opposite case, i.e. that style, being the mark or register of volition, *is* that statement, the ostensible content. In other words, *there is no underneath*. The 'iceberg' is a single, entirely visible entity – no obscuring waterline, no apparent tip, no nine-tenths of 'content' below. An aesthetic phenomenon only exists in any meaningful sense, in the gesture of its formalization – when made public in some way, audible or visible. Sontag's alternately *horizontal* conception of a piece of work, then, consists in precisely all that is apparent and nothing more. She writes that

> practically all metaphors for style amount to placing matter on the inside, style on the outside. It would be more to the point to reverse the metaphor. The matter, the subject, is on the outside; the style is on the inside. (...) In almost every case, our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being. The mask is the face.[60]

Sontag clarifies the point by explaining how the idea of a supposedly 'neutral' style is a misnomer, because formal 'transparency' or 'degree zero' affectlessness – that of the so-called International Style, for instance – itself inevitably connotes a certain meaning, whether intended or not (passive, businesslike or mundane, for example). She describes the celebrated 'white style' of Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* – 'impersonal, expository, lucid, flat' – as being entirely consistent with the protagonist's drained worldview.[61] Here style is not merely a carrier of content; it epitomizes it. Again, Sontag is at pains to point out that this is something 'everyone knows or claims to know', while their actual work suggests otherwise,[62] a discrepancy between theory and practice. And this is precisely her point: to push for an integrated *praxis*, not merely in the gesture of the artwork, but in lived experience,

[58] Susan Sontag, 'On Style', op. cit.

[59] Ibid., p. 25.

[60] Ibid., p. 26.

[61] Ibid., p. 25.

[62] Ibid., p. 25.

too; to claim exemplary artworks as models that might exert some influence on how we deal with everyday ethics, how we live according to held principles.

Though immediately concerned with literary criticism, Sontag's celebration of style readily applies across the arts. 'Style' can thus be read as more or less synonymous with other 'facing out' terms like 'form', 'surface', 'rhetoric', and so on. What Eco only insinuates, Sontag claims outright: that pertinent criticism, like pertinent art (or indeed criticism conceived *as* art, as a *form of thinking* itself) necessarily resists splitting its subject along a form/content fault line. What is perceived *is* content: appearance *is* existence. *There is no dichotomy*. For Sontag, as for Eco, this amounts to a working ethos.

(There's another sense in which 'On Style' duplicates *The Open Work*: When the essay was included in the a volume of collected criticism *Against Interpretation*, a year after first appearing in print, it served, together with the equally polemical title essay, as a statement of intent; the rest of the book then proceeds to practice what this dual preface preaches, or at least sets itself up to be read in this light.)

Sontag does, however, admit a useful distinction between this expansive notion of style, form, etc., and what she calls 'stylization', meaning that which typically defines canonical movements like Mannerism, Rococo or Art Nouveau that 'in some obvious way *cultivate* style'.[63] This kind of work, she writes, is the result of making 'the *by no means inevitable distinction* between matter and manner, theme and form'. It is essentially a product of irony and ambivalence rather than earnestness and conviction – 'of wilfulness rather than will'.[64] Stylization is a fully conscious act, contrived in both senses of the word, and so implies a 'closed' work in contrast to Eco's 'open' – less a means of fostering thought, more a way of adorning a statement already conceived. Against this *instrumental* conception of the artwork, she reminds the reader that

> Art is not only about something; it *is* something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world. (...) the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or moral judgement) in itself.[65]

This is the supposedly outdated conception of morality in art that Sontag rallies against – of style, form etc. as *merely referential*, tethered to moral opinion. Her exemplary modern artwork is a form of knowledge produced in passing – that is, by moving through a working process without preconceptions, and bearing the traces of choices made in the moment. Such work facilitates and records its own process: a form of character building.

The overarching project of contemporary philosopher Bruno Latour is pitted against the sort of binary thinking denounced by Sontag. From a background in social anthropology, Latour has emerged as a kind of professional polymath, out to dissolve categories and embrace the complex flux of present-day hybrids, networks, coalitions and conglomerates. The most pressing duality under Latour's attack is one firmly rooted in Enlightenment thinking: Nature vs. Society. During the scientific revolution, he explains, nature and society were considered discrete domains – and the grand project of 'scientific reason' accordingly worked towards the diagnosis, treatment and closure of their respective issues in different departments. And precisely because they were considered in isolation, the new paradigm was fundamentally as distorted and malevolent as the medieval one it set out to supplant.[66]

[63] Ibid., p. 27.

[64] Ibid., p. 28 (my italics).

[65] Ibid., p. 30.

[66] More specifically, in Latour's view the 'official' critical project instigated by Enlightenment-based positivism, and so that of modernity generally, proceeded along two contradictory lines: on one hand, a visible, culturally-sanctioned project of *purification* (the separation of 'society' and 'nature'); and on the other, a relatively covert *mediation* (the acknowledgement of nature/society hybrids as bundles of fluid, interconnected issues involving both material and non-material 'players').

The same flawed thinking endures today, Latour continues; only now the dualism is not just pernicious but quite possibly *fatal* if it continues to inform our approach to, say, global ecology – where so-called 'nature' and so-called 'society' are of course inextricably entwined. Latour's key work here is *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991),[67] which tells the story of how quickly and resiliently the objective, irrefutable, stand-alone *fact* became the prime epistemological currency during the scientific revolution. While the 'matters of fact' of scientific reason were useful in tearing down previously held myths, he says, they simultaneously suppressed other ways of contemplating the world, and so too the possibility of other 'modes of existence'. He conceives of critique not in terms of diagnosis or problem solving, more as a kind of coping mechanism, an *attitude of orientation*.

Much of Latour's work is propelled by language, not least the recuperation of mundane or outmoded terms. He argues, for instance, that we ought to supplant our misguided faith in these 'matters of fact' by instead trying to grasp the complexities of communal 'matters of concern', and calls for ways of writing, speaking and visualizing that circumscribe the actual, ephemeral and contingent nature of networks, assemblies, allegiances, contingencies, vested interests and contradictions.[68] Such chains of like-minded words recur again and again in Latour's writing, epitomizing the relentless connectivity, overabundance, and flux of forces that constitute his worldview. Relations are considered in terms of 'things' – a word etymologically rooted in 'bundles of issues' as opposed to sovereign 'objects'; and he has semi-seriously proposed a revolutionary 'Compositionism' – a term that playfully points to several relevant linguistic neighbours such as combination, composure, compromise, and compost.[69]

Although Latour's writing is concerned with The Critical Project in the broadest cultural sense, his thinking aligns easily enough with such as Eco's and Sontag's specifically aesthetic concerns. If Eco advocates a holistic, 'organic' approach to producing artworks, and Sontag posits the same in terms of contemplating them, Latour's philosophy neatly integrates the two. That's to say, only by authentically (= accurately, appropriately) apprehending a situation or matter can it be authentically (= efficiently, constructively) worked on towards transformation. In his summary prognosis, then, the pernicious parallax of dualistic thinking can be corrected only by distributing our attention across *the entire scenography of a situation* – taking in the fullest extent of how any given thing is composed, and how that composition manifests itself. To this end, he recommends 'kayaking' between polarities:

> The absence of a bridge is not such a problem. What counts is your ability to equip yourself with the right paraphernalia so that you can go down the river without drowning yourself. (...) you will probably agree that the two riverbanks are bound to look rather different once you apprehend both of them from the point of view of such a kayaking movement forward. This flowing lateral direction, turned at 90 degrees from the obsessive question of bridge-building is, if I am not mistaken, what William James has called 'pure experience'.[70]

Whether conceived in terms of nature/society or form/content, I read this 'pure experience' as synonymous with Eco's sense of authenticity. That's to say, it has nothing to do with overarching laws, rules, or any of the other absolutes that Latour derides as the misleading holy grails of modern thinking. On the contrary, it is always immanent in, and specific to, a given situation – a singular, momentary 'truth' that is always fleeting (and necessarily 'on hold' in quotation marks).

All of which implies a further merger of another popular binary – that of theory/practice. The notion of a *critical maker* is circular: a pertinent way of looking (contemplating, critiquing, theorizing) feeds a pertinent way of working (producing, making, practising) that feeds a pertinent way of looking, and so

[67] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* [1991, French] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[68] For example see: Bruno Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008).

[69] Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 3, Summer 2010.

[70] Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, op. cit., p. 14.

on. The self-swallowing Ouroborus, the snake-eating-its-own-tail, turns back on itself in the image of momentum performed as self-reflexivity; and the recurring attitude related throughout this chapter is likewise *Ouroboric* in the sense that it proposes a shift from *a strict point of view* to *a more diffuse awareness*. It is predicated on, and perpetuates, a moving philosophy: form must be a way of thinking … thought must be a way of forming … and so on, and so on.

And so to end, a few questions in order to begin:

If Eco argues that authentic art is necessarily timely, and posits his deliberately ambiguous Open Works as exemplary, how long exactly is the Open Work's moment: for the century or so following the industrial revolution, bookended by, say, Mallarmé and Stockhausen? Or longer still – the entire post-Enlightenment modern era, perhaps? Had it reached some kind of critical mass or apotheosis in the early 1960s, or did it continue? More pointedly, does Eco's 1962 poetics remain a valid way of working today; and if so, according to its own operating logic, the dialectical transformation of forms, and with Latour's 'entire scenography of a situation' in mind, what does this way of working look like right now?



Cover of *Dot Dot Dot* #20, 2010

# 2: DOT DOT DOT

This is essentially a second, parallel introduction, intended to trace the genealogy of interests that inform the present work up to the point of starting to write it. Far and away the main means of exploring the ideas laid out in chapter 1 – form as a way of thinking, symbiotic form and content, the confluence of aesthetics and ethics, and so on – has been the biannual arts journal *Dot Dot Dot*.

I co-founded the journal in 2000, then continued to edit it up to and including the final issue (#20) at the end of 2010. However, inasmuch as a successor called *Bulletins of the Serving Library* immediately continued with the same circle of contributors tapping the same cultural vein in the same format on the same schedule, this issue was at most only ever *pseudo*-final.[1] The point was purely rhetorical – partly to flag certain structural shifts (root-level changes in our publishing mechanism, a slight adjustment of editorial priorities), but equally to stage a series of what were, for us, unusually candid reflections on the publication's gathering interests, trajectory and philosophy. In other words, the issue posed as a conclusion in order to contemplate what we'd become, and how we might usefully develop.

The majority of the present chapter comprises a series of 'surrogate editorials' that were originally written for that last *Dot Dot Dot*. Together they relate the journal's concluding preoccupations in advance of being recalibrated and reincarnated under a new guise. Before starting on this relative present, first it's necessary to dash through its past.

## 2.1: WHAT WE'D BECOME

In the beginning, *Dot Dot Dot* was resolutely from and about graphic design – to the extent that the heart of the pilot issue comprised an encyclopaedia of previous design periodicals. This was an early inkling of the self-reflexive streak that would gradually become its defining trait. Soon, however, this relatively narrow focus on a single discipline expanded to circumscribe the full range of the plastic, applied and liberal arts – particularly fine art, music, film and literature. Later it drifted even further afield, skirting the edges of sociology, cultural studies, mathematics and philosophy.

To give an idea of the range within a single issue, #4 from 2002 included a profile of seminal Swiss graphic designer Karl Gerstner, an overview of the extra-curricular projects of Talking Heads' vocalist David Byrne, some thoughts on literary translation inspired by the writing of Milan Kundera, an interview with British cultural critic Judith Williamson, and an annotated CV of rogue U.S. filmmaker Harmony Korine. Its front cover included three unsolicited descriptions of the journal by other people: 'a. Archaeological Aesthetics, b. Based on true stories, c. Stroppy/Revelatory' – which is as good a compound summary as any at the time.

But the real watershed moment involved a stray essay in #5 by deadpan American vocalist and sometime cultural analyst Ian Svenonius called 'The Beatles/Stones Dialectic'. The piece is a tongue-in-cheek Marxist meditation on *One Plus One*, Jean-Luc Godard's 1968 oddball documentary based on footage of The Rolling Stones composing and recording their equally oddball track, 'Sympathy for the Devil'. Even more than the stuff in #4, this essay had nothing at all to do with even the loosest idea of what constitutes graphic design.

At this point our editorial policy was based on some vague notion of what a graphic design journal *ought* to include, more or less informed by that encyclopaedia of past models – in which case 'The

[1] *Dot Dot Dot* #'s 1 and 2 were published in 2001, #'s 3 and 4 in 2002, etc., and *Bulletins of The Serving Library* continued this biannual schedule exactly a decade later (#'s 1 and 2 in 2011, etc.). *Dot Dot Dot* was founded by myself, Peter Bilak, Jürgen Albrecht and Tom Unverzagt, but by #3 this group had already dwindled to Peter and myself. The two of us continued to edit the journal together until #10, at which point I moved to New York, effectively taking the journal with me, and David Reinfurt slowly supplanted Peter as co-editor. After *Dot Dot Dot* #20, David and I established *Bulletins of The Serving Library* together with Angie Keefer, and the three of us continue to edit it at the time of writing. The final part of the present chapter elaborates on this shift.

Beatles/Stones Dialectic' would be exempt. Fortunately, we were too enamoured with Svenonious's piece, ran it regardless, and from here on avoided second-guessing others' expectations. We became ourselves, which is to say a piece no longer had to be about graphic design per se, only instructive as an approach to culture in general – which naturally *includes* graphic design. Though obvious enough in retrospect, this slight switch in thinking – parochial to cosmopolitan – made all the difference. Almost by accident, this is how the journal came to reflect the wider precariousness of the discipline of graphic design (indeed its very *lack* of discipline) over the same period.

Up to a point, this newfound elasticity was entirely productive. For a while, at least, *Dot Dot Dot* was *defined* by its ambiguity and promiscuity, probably exacerbated by the fact that we never really took the trouble to articulate our free-ranging interests as clearly as we might have done in editorial asides or other rhetorical mirrors. Among certain art and design circles, the journal duly acquired – and to some degree played up to – a reputation for being reticent and abstruse. Here, for instance, is a typically nebulous, deliberately unpunctuated blurb ('A ROMANCE') from the back cover of the tenth issue ('X'), halfway through the journal's decade of existence:

Since its conception in 2000 DOT DOT DOT has attempted to essay a jocuserious fanzine-journal-orphanage based on true stories providence and elementary mathematics deeply concerned with art-des-mus-film-lang-lit-arch-etc. through uptight optipessimistic stroppy/revelatory ghostwriting by past & present tense spirits mapping B-sides and out-takes pushing for a resolution in bleak midwinter and latesummer as local and general aesthetics are wound on an ever-tightening heterotopic coil of the applied fantastic.[2]

*Note: For the remainder of this thesis, longer excerpts of my own previously published writing are set to the same measure as the main text but in* Helvetica*, as above, in order to distinguish them from the longer quotations from other writers, which are indented in* `Courier`**.** *The former includes instances in which I had an editorial role strong enough to reasonably claim them as 'mine' – which more often than not really means 'ours', i.e. worked on together with David Reinfurt or Will Holder under the auspices of Dexter Sinister and Will Stuart respectively (see Acknowledgements).*

It's important to emphasize that all this obfuscation wasn't exactly *contrived* – we weren't trying to come across as arrogant or hermetic, but simply spent our time and energy worrying over what to include rather than how to frame it. That said, it's true enough to say that we had little idea how or why to elucidate the drift from one domain to many, that such elucidation felt unnecessary, and even in some equally obscure way misleading or inappropriate. If there was ever anything like a pivotal idea behind *Dot Dot Dot*, then, it was (paradoxically, *elliptically*) to remain emphatically in flux – a thermostat of a journal set to regulate its reason over the slow accumulation of issues, with as much variety between them as within a single one.[3]

Still, as one judicious commentator noted around *Dot Dot Dot*'s half-life, while the journal wasn't explicitly about graphic design, it always remained resolutely *from* it. Its essays were concerned with what are essentially transferable ways of working, and what distinguished the journal from its nearest neighbours was the fact that these approaches or attitudes were not only directly addressed in the writing, but equally embodied by *the design of the writing*. By which I don't simply mean the graphic

[2] The blurb continues into a second paragraph headed 'BUT WITHOUT SENTIMENT': 'X is a montage of articles drawn from issues 2–9. This is NOT A RETROSPECTIVE ACT, more a logical next step; a slight return in response to the self-righteous statement of intent on the cover of #1 (which makes good fire); a reply to ourselves after five years' trial and error which asks: why shouldn't we travel at different speeds?' Just as the rest of the issue is a compendium of previously published pieces, this blurb is assembled from other issues' 'subtitles' (e.g. 'Not exactly a graphic design magazine, more an attempt'; 'Graphic design's B-sides and out-takes', and so on).

[3] In fact, an editorial statement on the front of the pilot issue already declared itself to be 'a magazine in flux / willing to adjust itself according to content'. I'm fairly sure that this was an attempt to convince ourselves and others that a lack of direction was productive without really understanding why; but more charitably, maybe we initially *sensed* why being 'in flux' might be a good idea, and only latterly *realized* it along with the tools to articulate why. That said, that pilot issue contained a number of articles about other design magazines past and present that we considered a kind of fundamental research – and this at least served the purpose of forging a direction by articulating what we *didn't* want to be. The elliptical nature of this footnote is a fairly good gauge of *Dot Dot Dot*'s editorial tone over the years.

design of a given essay (which alludes to the visual organization of a contribution, i.e. the typesetting and layout); I mean that *the verbal structure* of the writing in *Dot Dot Dot* was often more deliberate and prominent than in most of its equivalents – and usually amounted to a substantial part of whatever point was being made. What started out as an occasional tic became habitual: rather than passively writing about things, we became somewhat adept at actively *demonstrating* them.

On the cover of #9, for example, we listed our various debtors (bookstores, distributors, advertisers) along with their debts (on the spine) at the end of a short piece about pro-active editorial strategies and the economic oxymoron of independent publishing, thereby performing the subject on the surface of the object.[4] Surprisingly enough, this actually had some effect, as some half of those listed were duly shamed into paying what they owed (which guaranteed the journal's existence for at least another issue) – and this was part of the reason for trying it. But the blacklist was equally conceived as a playful attempt to activate a subject that would otherwise be as engaging as anyone complaining about their tax returns.

[4] Editorial, 'Elementary Mathematics', *Dot Dot Dot* #9, 2005.

# DOT DOT DOT 9: elementary mathematics

In the candid spirit of a few publications and products which have exposed their process and production costs,† DDD9 begins—or ends—by taking into account its current financial state. In all innocence it has taken us nine issues to understand why independent publishing is an oxymoron, or at least impossible without third-party sponsorship: basically, we're too small to afford a solicitor. If our distributors and bookshops paid all outstanding debts (dating from up to three years ago) the magazine could sustain itself, but however FINAL, the growing list of debtors repeatedly ignore demands—we assume because they arrive without any (convincing) threat of legal action. So the independent can be ignored as long as 'solicitors' costs' is not in the vocabulary of arts funding applications.



† Rem Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL* (1995), spread itemising OMA's expenditure




† Reverse of sleeve for TV Personalities' 7" EP *Where's Bill Grundy Now?* with production costs (1978)

This open presentation of our accounts is, then, a surrogate solicitor, some kind of commercial hari-kiri attempt to embarass our debtors into settling outstanding bills. We're reasoning that if we piss them off in the process it doesn't really make much difference either way. Until then we remain in a circle of funding for which we're eternally grateful but would rather be able to do without.

ISBN 90-77620-03-6
51495
9 789077 620038

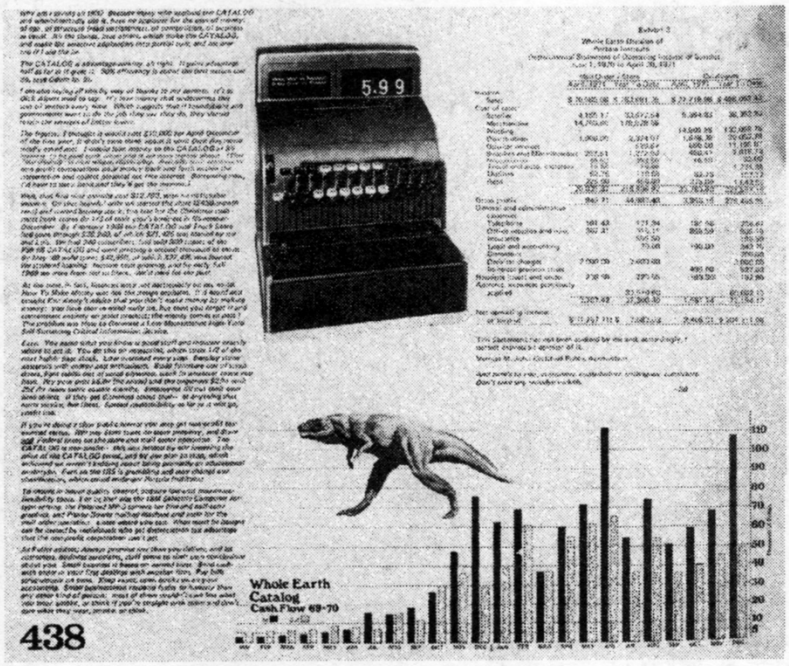
Based on DDD8, a single issue (print run 3,000) costs this much to produce:

| (all figures in €) | |
|---|---|
| | Printing |
| | Authors |
| | Editorial/Office |
| | Postage |
| | Miscellaneous |
| | — |

of which this much is typically generated from advertising:
and this much made from combined shop and subscription sales:
(that's €2.75 (USA) or €5 (Europe) per each €12.50 copy sold)
so we are typically subsidised this much by Dutch arts funding:

The list below details all outstanding debts as DDD9 goes to print, which can be made payable to *Dot dot dot VOF*, account no. 50 26 69 659. This information is correct as of 01/01/2005:

| | |
|---|---|
| 03/08/2002 | Hennessey & Ingalls, USA |
| 20/10/2002 | Actar, Spain |
| 05/12/2002 | CCA bookstore, Canada |
| 18/01/2003 | Actar, Spain |
| 14/04/2003 | Actar, Spain |
| 20/08/2003 | Actar, Spain |
| 16/10/2003 | Actar, Spain |
| 30/11/2003 | goodwill, NL |
| 23/12/2003 | Athaeneum books, NL |
| 23/03/2004 | Actar, Spain |
| 15/04/2004 | Actar, Spain |
| 23/04/2004 | Nijhof & Lee books, NL |
| 11/07/2004 | Actar, Spain |
| 16/07/2004 | Nijhof & Lee books, NL |
| 04/08/2004 | Nijhof & Lee books, NL |
| 26/04/2004 | Nijhof & Lee books, NL |
| 30/08/2004 | Secretonix, Portugal |
| 12/10/2004 | Magma books, UK |
| 15/10/2004 | Nijhof & Lee books, NL |
| 21/10/2004 | Fraktaly SRO, Czech Rep. |
| 25/10/2004 | Actar, Spain |
| | — |
| | TOTAL AMOUNT OWED: |




† *The Last Whole Earth Catalogue* (1971), detail of Money spread from the section 'How to make a Whole Earth Catalogue' in the closing pages of the 1960s/70s counterculture bible. See DDD8 pp.104–5 for a legible reproduction.

A couple of years later, #15 was produced entirely on location by a small team of writers and printers working concertedly over a two week period in a large open gallery space at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva.[5] The situation was set up to explore two themes: first, the notion of 'collective writing', which was most prominently realized in the issue by American novelist Jonathan Lethem in an essay on plagiarism, itself entirely plagiarized from multiple sources stitched together so seamlessly that it's fairly shocking learn two thirds of the way through that you've actually been reading a collection of excerpts (that are then exhaustively inventorized in a pair of postscripts);[6] and second, the contemporary imperative to 'perform' as a freelance cultural worker constantly on call, inspired by a recent essay on overproduction and exhaustion by German art critic Jan Verwoert.[7]



The plan was to install Verwoert into a cartoon version of the cultural condition he was calling into question. We duly flew him in from Berlin, set him up at a makeshift desk with a blanket in the corner of the gallery, and asked him to extend his essay according to an unusually tangible deadline – a group of anxious editors in uncomfortably close, constant proximity, and a brooding printing apparatus that was effectively draining our budget as long as it remained inoperative. The rest of the issue grew around this premise, with several other collaborators writing in the margins of his polemic. A note to the issue suggests how the setup was slowly made manifest:

Over a compressed fortnight … the issue then emerges in real-time … advancing through the 14 staggered cut-off points dictated by our eccentric technology's 8-page signatures (14 x 8 = 112 pages). We originally had elaborate plans to plot these various flows of time, money and people on graph paper, but have since realized a more pertinent representation: a living, breathing bar chart – just over there to the right – where one stack of blank paper is slowly sinking as another covered in ink rises exponentially.

Mindful of this experience in Geneva, #17 was also emphatically both *realtime* and *in situ* – an exhaustive transcription of three consecutive evenings of talks we programmed at Somerset House in London.[8] The talks were themselves concerned with ways of graphically representing verbal language, especially different ways of speaking to a public audience. Both event and publication – and event-as-publication-as-event – were publicized according to this multiple choice blurb:

*Dot Dot Dot* 17 will be (read) (spoken) (delivered) from two (lecterns) (supports) (props) at the Embankment Galleries, Somerset House, London on 29/30/31 October 2008 in advance of being (transcribed) (translated) (transfixed) and returned at the close of the exhibition (multiplied) (published) (distributed) on 21 December 2008.

[5] The project took place within the context of a group exhibition, *Wouldn't It be Nice? Wishful Thinking in Art and Design*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva, 26 October – 16 December, 2007.

[6] Jonathan Lethem, 'The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism', *Dot Dot Dot* #15, 2007.

[7] Jan Verwoert, 'Use Me Up', *Metropolis M*, no. 1, 2007. The considerably extended version for *Dot Dot Dot* #15 was titled 'Exhaustion & Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform'.

[8] These evenings were organized for the London iteration of *Wouldn't It be Nice?* at Somerset House, 17 September – 21 December, 2008. The show also stopped off at Zurich, where we exhibited the newly produced *Dot Dot Dot* #15, along with a few artefacts we'd made along the way.

Similarly, too, #19 was assembled from a few weeks' concentrated production, this time working on something we christened *The First/Last Newspaper* from a space opposite *The New York Times* in Midtown Manhattan.[9] Here the idea was to reflect – and reflect on – major shifts in the news industry from an unusually disinterested vantage, while physically working from as close to the source as possible.

These last examples demonstrate how, in setting up the conditions to assemble the journal in a specific location on the basis of some peculiar premise, the theme becomes tangled up with the mode of production. Such a setup ensures from the outset that the form and content of the result are symbiotic – a proposition that had repeatedly cropped up in my own irregular contributions to *Dot Dot Dot* over the years. Here are three brief instances, the first excerpted from a piece in #5 (2003) about British graphic designer and historian Richard Hollis, auspiciously titled 'Way of Working':[10]

This trail of work developed because the commissioning parties in each case had recognized Hollis's previous work and interest. In each case a relationship was established on the basis of his approach. Because of this implicit understanding, the shared wavelength, the final product ends up greater than the sum of its constituent contributors. An intense working relationship results from a joint search for the best means of communicating ideas, through familiarity with the subject matter and the author's relation to it. Rather than the books being editor- or designer-led, they push for a third, uncharted way.

Or, from a list of introductory anecdotes called 'Dear X' in #8 (2004), this one concerning Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Another duality: the industry of Joyce scholarship is divided into two camps – those who consider the novel's structure central, versus those who consider the narrative central. But Oxford scholar Jeri Johnson suggests that both camps spectacularly miss the point that *Ulysses*' genius lies precisely in the fact that it is both at once, and they are fundamentally inseparable. Again, the composite is the essence.

And from the penultimate paragraph of 'Science, Fiction', an essay on the work of English biologist and novelist E.C. Large in #17 (2009):

While it seems that, professionally at least, Large never really reconciled the division of his scientific and literary work, it is precisely the symbiosis of the two that animates his early fiction today. His writing is defined by a wide-ranging set of interests, temperament and capacity which is equal parts classic and romantic – a duality which extends to any of the parallel dichotomies itemized by Robert M. Pirsig in his *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: Scientific versus Artistic, Technical versus Human, or Rational versus Emotional. Pirsig sets up these opposites in order to assert that the fundamental misunderstanding, disinformation, mistrust and hostility which characterizes modern societies are rooted in the personal and communal inability to reconcile these two poles.

## 2.2: HOW WE MIGHT USEFULLY DEVELOP

I said that *Dot Dot Dot*'s ambiguous character was productive 'up to a point'. Sometime around 2010, after 10 years and 19 issues, the ambiguity and demonstration had culminated in an overwhelming predilection for all things self-reflexive. This was beginning to seem rote, stale, and ultimately something closer to solipsism. It seemed imperative to throw some kind of a spanner in the journal's works in order to maintain the momentum that had propelled it so far.

Moreover, as we became less and less clear about where the publication was *coming from*, the same could be said of its *purpose*. We found ourselves wondering what the journal had hoped – and might still be hoping – to advocate or otherwise accomplish. The idea behind the final issue of *Dot Dot Dot*

[9] See chapter §6.7–9.

[10] See also §9.3.

was therefore to write as plainly as possible what the magazine and its constellation had come to stand for over the previous ten years, as well as what it wanted to achieve with that stance – any cultural or pedagogical ambitions, big- or small-p political sympathies, and so on. It bears repeating, though, that the *main* reason for wanting to be unusually direct wasn't in order to stake some kind of claim or otherwise alter our relatively esoteric bearing, but because we'd become fairly comfortable presenting a certain kind of work, and this comfort was suddenly discomfiting. The most obvious way to break the usual thing, we reasoned, would be to attempt its opposite. The idea of rallying ourselves to make an unequivocal statement of intent in 2010 seemed such an awkward, alien idea for us that it could surely only be productive.

In the six months leading up to #20, I'd been chasing this avowed 'directness' in various ways. One was to transcribe from memory a public discussion with my close colleague Will Holder about 'the changing face of art and culture in Britain since the 1960s' while leaning on Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Struttura per parlare in piedi* at the entrance to a gallery at Tate Modern.[11] Another involved writing longish letters to a few people after hearing them talk on certain subjects and in ways that seemed pertinent to the same subject. And in the meantime, a small bunch of other likely contributors inadvertently trailed crumbs of related insight. As I stalled, waiting to have written something definite enough to invite this modest crowd with the proper decorum, i.e. to offer a springboard or frame of reference for what they might write, the obvious dawned slowly and way past the deadline: only *through* writing to those people would I be able to spill and refine anything I had to say.

Here, I wrote and rewrote to them individually, was the problem: I could only get at this so-called directness with people I already knew, in discussions based on mutual references and prior conversations. When I tried to reassemble the same ideas for the journal's phantom audience in an essay or article or editorial or even a transcription, naturally I had to insert all the references to avoid total obfuscation – and as soon as I did that the whole thing started to sag. What had previously seemed fluid, pointed and efficient now became glib, sanctimonious and turgid. Simply put, the directness no longer came across as direct, or at least was grossly overwhelmed by these other, lumpen qualities. All of which made me very uneasy becauseb it's tied up in knots with one of the very things I was hoping to be direct *about* – something, as ever, to do with the relationship between form and content.

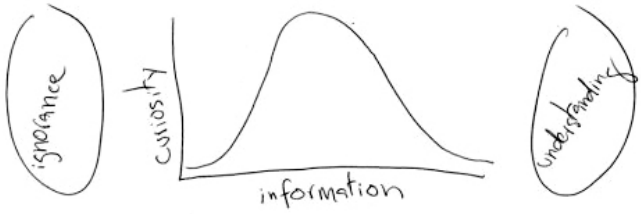
More specifically: if, on reading back my attempts to be direct, what comes across is not nearly as direct as, say, trite, then it follows that the actual directness has to be filtered or doctored in some way in order to come across as the kind of 'direct' I'm after. It needs to go through some kind of language mangle in order to translate what's on my mind into words with equivalent sense and volition. This involves rhetoric – or 'style', or 'surface'. And one of the more frequently recurring topics of conversation with Will and everyone else referred to above concerned the extremely mediated nature of the condition we're all living through; of the difference between things wanting to come across as something as opposed to simply being what they are – indeed, of culture 'wrapped in quotation marks' and the task of tweezering stuff back out of them. Yet here I was looking for a way to mediate my own 'directness.' Hypocritical, surely (?)

I should have read Susan Sontag's essay 'On Style' much earlier. There she makes a potent and what from this vantage suddenly seemed patently obvious case for the authority of style.[12] Sontag inverts the received wisdom that form is interior and content exterior, asserting instead that *whatever is perceived is content*. In other words, there's no dichotomy – no division between what and how something is communicated; in which case there's no contradiction in the idea that this attempt to be direct is not 'pure' (as I'd imagined), but in fact wholly contrived – and rightly so.

[11] For further thoughts on Pistoletto's piece and the rest of his 'Minus Objects' see §1.7 and §5.3. The conversation took place under the rubric *Tourette's V* at Tate Modern, London, on 2 May, 2009, as part of the group show *Stutter* (26 April – 16 August, 2009). Although the discussion was supposed to be about 'the changing face of art and culture in Britain since the 1960s', we ended up circling many of the same issues I meant to deal within the journal – not least the limits of self-reflexivity. See also our 'preparatory' conversation 'in §7.7, as well as the 'Publick Notice' (published to accompany our contribution to *Stutter*) in the Appendix.

[12] See §1.8.

The more I considered the idea of standing for something, along with any outcome of that stance, the more I saw that the essential quality we'd always been chasing in *Dot Dot Dot* was something like 'movement' – or more precisely, 'momentum'. Rest assured any satisfaction at this realization was soon vanquished by the dubious nature of its flimsy abstraction. Still, consider the trajectory of this simple bell curve drawn by Swiss curator Anthony Huberman to illustrate an essay he wrote for that *Dot Dot Dot* #15 made in Geneva:




On a graph that plots information (X) against human curiosity (Y), the vector begins at zero information and zero curiosity, rises to a midpoint of adequate information, maximum curiosity and total engagement, then falls as surplus information yields diminishing interest. The question Huberman asks – in view of making and showing art – is: How to surf the top of the curve by offering just the right amount of information to maintain momentum, but not so much as to kill it? How to maximize potential energy? [13] Or, if this is still too abstract, consider the same sentiment written as a sentence by the other half of Dexter Sinister:

> The ongoing process of attempting to understand (but never really understanding completely) is absolutely productive. The relentless attempt to understand is what keeps a practice moving forward.[14]

With Anthony's diagram and David's sentence in mind, I came to finally realize that *Dot Dot Dot* was always invested in the simple documentation, the more difficult demonstration, and the implicit promotion of 'momentum': to keep ourselves moving, and ideally move the reader en route.

## 2.3: FOUR SURROGATE EDITORIALS

So far so obvious, but what becomes quickly apparent is that writing as much down isn't a very good documentation or demonstration or promotion of it. In fact it's the opposite inasmuch as any articulation or definition of it means – by definition! – that it's been apprehended, fixed, domesticated, neutered. Otherwise put, it's stopped moving: it's static.

The most we can achieve 'directly' is to point directly at *this* fact – a second-level directness, certainly, but a directness nonetheless; a 'directness' in quotation marks.

And to take this spiralling line of thinking to its logical, which is to say paradoxical, non-conclusion, such directness can be achieved only indirectly, which is to say by glancing, bouncing, and refusing to accept the paralysis that this contradiction suggests.

At which point it dawned on me that the flaw in my initial approach to this 'testimonial' issue of *Dot Dot Dot* lay precisely in focusing our attention back on the journal itself. The same week, a whisky guru called Charlie McLean told me of a phrase he and his colleagues used as shorthand for pretentious, self-absorbed writing during his days as a copy editor. 'Eyes … Gloss … Over …', he said. It was only when I wrote it down later that I noticed the acronym EGO – and understood that my whole approach was suffering from the same problem, effectively short-circuiting itself.

[13] Anthony Huberman, 'Naive Set Theory', *Dot Dot Dot* #15, 2007.

[14] For reasons too involved to go into here, the essay has the same title as Huberman's piece: David Reinfurt, 'Naive Set Theory', published in *Dot Dot Dot* #17, 2008.

It became just as clear to me, too, that all our concerns and interests still surface – without the deadening weight of narcissism – when the subject matter lies somewhere other than in the mirror. That's to say, when we aim at other targets, writing about *the* world rather than our world, obliquely flirting with truth rather than crudely propositioning it.

So *Dot Dot Dot* #20's eventual assortment of articles duly *refracted* the same themes of reevaluation and reinvention. A number of interrelated pieces contemplate the benefits and pitfalls of ambiguity and 'non-knowledge', for instance, while others consider paradigm shifts in art, philosophy and technology. But 'clarity' and 'values' and 'ethics' are most prominently tackled in the handful of so-called surrogate editorials. They're surrogate in the sense that they address topics that can be considered proxies for the *Dot Dot Dot* itself; namely, (1) a painting, (2) a letter, (3) an article in another magazine, and (4) an exhibition. Here follow these four 'glancing, bouncing' attempts to discern ourselves, plus a postscript. Each one is briefly introduced, then reproduced verbatim.

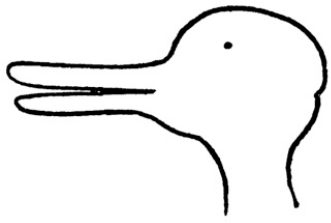
**(a) In response to a painting: 'that's what *we*'d like to paint'**

The first surrogate is titled 'A Word on the Cover'. This refers not only to the fact that it actually captions an image on the front, but also to the fact that this image amounts to a word – a very self-reflexive beginning to a very self-reflexive issue. *Grey Painting: Text version 2* (2008) is one of a series of small oil paintings by British artist Philomene Pirecki.[15] Three blobs of primary red, blue and yellow are messily, progressively combined within the work to construct four geometric letters: G, R, E, and Y. These characters are superimposed directly on top of one another to form a monogram, a composite character that bleeds off the edge and so doubles as a painted frame. Palette and canvas are one and the same, literally and metaphorically spelling out its own composition.

Auspiciously enough, the canvas is more or less the same format and proportion as *Dot Dot Dot*, which meant we could reproduce it at actual size by direct contact with a flatbed scanner. The brushstrokes are therefore to scale and so unusually apparent.

The ostensible 'caption' takes the form of an informal letter from the editor to the painter, and, in spelling out the implications of this particularly elliptical painting, serves to preface to the entire issue. The letter recounts a recent lecture by German cultural critic Diedrich Diederichsen on the notoriously prolific production of German artist Martin Kippenberger; a pathologically incessant approach that's then implicitly claimed as 'painterly' in the sense that (like Pirecki's painting) time is markedly manifest in the work.

Folded into this brief text, too, are a few of Pirecki's own thoughts (in italics) on the workings of her painting's assembled illusion, particularly the way it invokes what she calls a 'double perception' by alternately flipping between 'inner' and 'outer' aspects – not unlike that classic gestalt cartoon duckrabbit who pops up later in the issue, and generally serves as a kind of mascot throughout.



Dear Philomene,

As you know, I'd like to reproduce that deceptively modest painting of yours – the one whose primary colours combine to spell out their composite and form their own frame – on the cover of this last

[15] Reproduced in greyscale as the frontispiece to this chapter.

*Dot Dot Dot*. I'd also like to find a way of folding in some of your written thoughts around this piece and another, related work. Your writing about how it sets up the possibility of seeing both the illusion and 'disillusion' simultaneously, for example, started me thinking how the cross-semantics of that 'disillusion' are wholly pertinent to this issue.

You go on to write about *how the illusion continues to work on me despite also seeing its undoing, a bit like not being able to help yourself from always laughing at a joke even though you know the punchline already*, which reminds me of a talk Diedrich Diederichsen gave to inaugurate a recent Martin Kippenberger retrospective, 'The Problem Perspective'. Diedrich's thoughts hung on two ways of considering Kippenberger in terms of broken joke structures. The joke is already a familiar motif in Kippenberger's work, not least in the shaggy dog stories he infamously dragged out at openings and other events. On this occasion, though, Diedrich was referencing a specific painting in the show, in which a single panel of Matt Groening's comic strip 'Life in Hell' is repeated across the canvas so one character incessantly tells the other 'I hate you' … 'I hate you' … 'I hate you' …

Diedrich distinguished between two types of broken joke: (1) a joke without a punchline, and (2) a joke in which the punchline is repeated over and over again, and proposed that both (at once) are analogous to Kippenberger's work in general, in the sense that each new piece or project served as the starting point for the next, without end or hierarchy. So a painting would lead to a series of paintings which would be collected into a show which would require a poster which would be collected with other posters to be published in a book whose cover would be reproduced as an invitation card which would be deployed in a talk, and so on. All production fed this snowballing momentum, and its perpetuation was paramount – in effect, WAS the work. Neither of Diedrich's un-jokes amount to anything laugh-out-loud funny, of course, but being both trite and true, the act of telling them is loopily consonant with the rest of Kippenberger's redemptive melancholy – with his work's surplus of good humour.

Finally, you note that *while the illusion doesn't physically change, your perception of it does.* Here I can take a first stab at articulating the fundamental point of *Dot Dot Dot* by substituting 'culture' for 'illusion' – although, sure, culture changes too. My point is: doesn't this realization of the grey area between illusion and disillusion amount to perceiving rather than observing; aren't we involved in setting up the conditions for a reading and looking that's active rather than passive? As you rightly conclude: *The illusion only exists when it's seen. It's the viewer who brings it into being (in their eye/mind). And the two-way mirror not only reflects the image but also the viewer in the moment of recognition or figuring out what's going on*.

Insight as the precondition *and* goal of self-reflexivity: that's what *we*'d like to paint.

Regards,

Stuart

**(b) In response to a letter: 'what helped me get over my dialectical mental block'**

At the heart of the last issue is a bona fide (if aggressively solicited) letter to the editor from art critic and sometime *Dot Dot Dot* contributor Mike Sperlinger. This spurred a second surrogate editorial response, and both were gathered under the title 'A Half-Open Letter'. We'd conceived the correspondence as an excuse to think through an offhand remark he'd made a year or so beforehand during a presentation on one of those three evenings at Somerset House: that '*Dot Dot Dot*'s discourse is always to a higher power.' This was an early acknowledgement of our burgeoning self-reflection, though Mike admits in his letter that he 'felt, secretly, at the time, that this formula was glib, even as shorthand, or that it risked caricaturing *Dot Dot Dot* as somewhat glib – Escherizing it, so to speak.' The new missive would attempt a more substantial account of what *a discourse always to a higher power* might have been 'shorthand' for.

Fundamental to whatever convictions have driven *Dot Dot Dot* to date, he says, has been precisely the *lack* of self-theorizing. That is, the journal has effectively demonstrated what it 'stands for' by showing

rather than telling – and by implication also omitting. That said, he continues, 'the risks of codification are very real', and it seems therefore correct to seek to 'broach or break' our editorial reticence now, a decade old.

Rather than simply commending the journal's self-reflexive streak (which that initial 'higher power' seemed to imply), he now warns of its limits, albeit with reference to a 'honourable strain' of artists and writers latterly working in a similar vein. The problem is, he says, any strategy of relentless self-consciousness ultimately devolves into 'reified reflexivity' – a futile and increasingly irritating attempt to step out of itself in order to see itself. The problem is commensurate with the conundrum noted by Umberto Eco in the 'Form as Social Commitment' chapter of *The Open Work*; namely, the impossibility of describing a system by a language that is not itself influenced by that system. Mike writes:

> If it is dangerous or diabolical, it is because the more this idea of reflexivity flirts with mathematics and analytic philosophy the closer it edges to the precipices of pantomime and formalism. If reflexivity merely means infinite regress, *mise-en-abyme*, it is regressive and abysmal – a 'bad infinity', as Hegel would put it. To put it another way, reified reflexivity falls into the same trap that Jeff Wall identified as the fate of early conceptualism, reducing the process of reflection to mere intellectual tautology or a formal tic.

He then asserts that 'The fundamental risk reflexivity runs, in this mode, must be quietism' – that's to say, a project invested in *clarifying* confused thinking, but without necessarily putting that clarification to use. Reflexivity, he says, 'is gestural and fundamentally ironic', and at the crux of his commentary claims that 'any process of self-reflexivity worth its salt' – a *constructive* reflexivity – 'would have to run the risk that its own premises were untenable and be prepared to act radically on this knowledge.'

Mike posits 'dialectics' as a more athletic, 'less clubbable' strategy inasmuch as it is less constricted or short-circuited by its own methodology. Yet dialectics is still a fundamentally passive method, a tool for thinking rather than acting. Naturally thinking can stimulate action, but the immediate question remains: in terms of working in art and design, how to be involved and aware, inside and outside; or in terms of Mike's observations, how to inhabit an active dialectics?

The letter concludes with a nod to German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel's *Philosophical Fragments*,[16] a collection that Mike describes as 'at once incomplete and a self-sufficient totality'. Finally, he signs off with the following passage, which seems to insinuate, obscurely, that acknowledging and accepting such duplicity is part and parcel of the 'ethical bent' we're chasing in our exchange:

> Schlegel explicated his idea of the fragment entirely through fragmentary aphorisms, which are themselves both accretive and recalcitrant, positing understanding as an infinite process. Schlegel and his fellow German Romantics were also interested in reflexivity – 'It is a sublime taste always to like things better when they've been raised to the second power' etc. – but with an ethical bent which a more analytic, mathematical sensibility might have to elide. I think, too, of his most infamous pronouncement: 'It's equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two.' Meta-the-difference-between-the-two ...?

My own letter back starts with a summary of what Eco's getting at when he claims that properly avant-garde art equates a certain kind of 'social commitment', which I figured must be more or less synonymous with 'an ethical bent'. The summary of Eco's thesis is really an excuse to posit the work

[16] Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* [c. 1797, German] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

of American novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace as a recent example of it. Although Wallace's often literally sickening[17] facility for articulating self-consciousness is indeed the product of 'an analytic, mathematical sensibility', his work is equally concerned with quotidian ethics, or 'how to live a compassionate life'.[18]

From this vantage, too, Wallace's work can be seen to embody Schlegel's equilibrium.[19] The chain of words on which Mike ends, 'Meta-the-difference-between-the two', was in fact penned by Wallace himself as a means of dissociating himself from the two main strands of postwar fiction in the U.S., realism and metafiction. Wallace's self-appointed project – the social contract of his commitment to form, so to speak – was to work through present-day 'realist' issues *through* an uncharacteristically entertaining kind of metafiction. Otherwise put, he transcended the dichotomy. This breed of self-reflexivity, at once meta *and* grounded, sounds like a plausible escape from the trappings noted in Mike's letter – and to this extent might serve as a model for our own attempt to evolve.[20]

In Wallace's work, form embodies its themes in view of not merely describing the world but more palpably *apprehending* it. When a subject is truly grasped, it is digested, processed, transformed – squeezed into a new shape – and ideally the same thing happens on the receiving end in the mind of the reader. This purposeful alignment of form and subject matter is what *Dot Dot Dot* had been half-blindly aiming at, too; and with the benefit of hindsight it explains why, during the final issue's grand objective of clarity, we paradoxically found ourselves instead approaching some *pinnacle* of self-reflexivity – in order to exhaust or exorcise and ideally transform it, and ourselves, as subject and strategy. Purged, perhaps, we could turn to less involuted matters where, in Mike's words, 'less symmetrical and pleasant possibilities' might open up. Again: how to inhabit an *active* dialectics?

Dear Mike,

Thanks for your letter, which is about as resounding a clanging chair as I could hope for in this issue.[21]

I'd just written to someone else about how the word 'dialectics' sounds like 'dentistry' to me, though I wish I'd troubled over the analogy more. All I meant was that for me it's an off-putting word, or rather one, like 'hermeneutics', that no matter how many times I read its definition or have it otherwise explained to me, never sticks. We carry around those voucher-quotes you mention as tokens of the opposite – realizations, assimilations, when we really *get it*, and as such they describe a classic gift economy. This being the case, I want to complement the two references gifted at the end of your letter by offering one more in return. This is what helped me get over my dialectical mental block.

The ref. in question is approximately the first half of the chapter 'Form as Social Commitment' from Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1962). I skipped to this one first because its title seemed to promise explication of something that's been bothering me in relation to all the self-reflexivity that's hopefully reaching some kind of climax in these pages. The question was: what, in the end, is the point of the self-reflexivity that seems to be the closest we have to a common denominator of all we've shown, demonstrated, and promoted in *Dot Dot Dot*?

[17] Zadie Smith writes: 'The effect on the reader is powerful, unpleasant. Quite apart from being forced to share one's own mental space with the depressed person's infinitely dismal consciousness, to read those spiral sentences is to experience that dread of circularity embedded in the old joke about recursion (to understand recursion you must first understand recursion).' Zadie Smith, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace', *Changing My Mind* (London: Penguin, 2009).

[18] This clause refers to the subtitle of his posthumously published commencement speech: David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

[19] More on this in §3.8

[20] i.e. inasmuch as metafiction is, in Wallace's own estimation, a stereotypically male, masturbatory genre that's normally 'hellaciously unfun to read'.

[21] This 'clanging chair' refers to one Mike had inadvertently knocked over when arriving late to one of *Dot Dot Dot* #17's Somerset House nights, aptly interrupting one of the other talks on Pragmatism.

Eco starts his chapter by discussing the contemporaneous vogue of the word ‘alienation’, first by relating Hegel’s use of the term as equivalent to ‘objectification’, in which man alienates himself in or to an object in order to use it as an extension of the body (e.g. a spade). He then counterposes Marx’s use of the term roughly a hundred years and an industrial revolution later. Marx berated Hegel for stopping short at the positive aspect of this objectification, and went on to describe the extent of the negative, when the object (or social situation, love relationship, etc.) starts to work *against* the protagonist; in other words, when the object starts to use or control the user to a greater degree than the user is using or controlling the object.

Since moving to L.A., my favourite example of this is the car. In the positive sense (Hegel’s), then, you alienate yourself to or in the car in order to travel large distances at great speeds. The idea is of course to become one with the vehicle, a man-machine, to the degree that braking and steering and accelerating, etc. become second nature. Alienation, in the form of this objectification, allows the driver to prosthetically extend his natural abilities, as McLuhan later famously expounded. However, pushing quickly on to the negative sense (Marx’s), no sooner am I happily man-machining around in the Volkswagen than I find myself implicated into a myriad other, larger, more abstruse, insidious and (as you say) *diabolical* systems: the Highway Code, national and local driving laws, parking, gas, climate, congestion, prestige, planned obsolescence, and so on.

It follows that alienation in this *mise-en-abyme* of systems within systems within systems is a greater likelihood and problem in an industrial (and even more so in a post-industrial) society, because there are simply far more systems in place than in, say, Hegel’s time. This is surely close to your artist friend Merlin Carpenter’s description of the horse as these days constituting Troy itself: ‘the whole of Troy is now a horse’. Eco rereads Hegel via Marx because Hegel’s point of view can now be more clearly understood in contradistinction to Marx’s, and he spends so much energy explaining the difference between them, these positive and negative senses of ‘alienation’, in order to clarify that the infinite oscillation between them – the dialectic – is nothing less than the nature of the human condition itself. He concludes that chronic alienation defines contemporary society, ‘as much a given as weightlessness is to an astronaut’, though the resignation comes less as a shock than a shrug. Eco is not despondent, only realistic: the situation, he says, is *merely dialectic*, and this diffidence is vital. As it cannot be overcome or dissolved, the only way to deal with it is by, well, dealing with it – by engaging, acting, working, producing, and so on, yet crucially never losing sight of the broader systems within which the engaging, acting, working and producing are taking place.

There are a myriad other ways of expressing Eco’s dialectic in old issues of *Dot Dot Dot*. Off the top of my head: Stewart Brand (‘Pause. And begin again.’), Paul R. Halmos (‘Read it, absorb it, and forget it.’), Jean-Luc Godard (‘The problem is: to get back to zero.’), and of course Samuel Beckett (‘I can’t go on. I’ll go on.’) Common to all these pithy formulas, as with Eco’s rereading of Hegel and Marx, is the implicit weight of experience that informs each form of recalibration, whether Brand’s restarting, Halmos’s discarding, Godard’s returning, or Beckett’s continuing.

What I find so ‘totemic’ in David Foster Wallace is simply an updated articulation of the same drive – ultimately in the face of our own era’s brand of alienation. I’m not thinking about a particular piece or story or book, but rather the general trajectory of his intentions as recounted explicitly in interviews and implicitly in the work; in his worrying over moral and ethical purpose, e.g. ‘Look, man, we’d probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? … Right now I’m pretty much open to a brass ring.’

The writing that emerged from this aporia is technically stripped-down, severe, lucid, and thematically concerned with religion, relationships, and boredom. Technically speaking, the form and content of this later writing seem markedly mundane in view of his earlier postmodern excesses. I read it as a kind of forward-facing return (like walking backwards on a moving sidewalk going forwards), by which I mean a poetics devoid of the reactionary or conservative overtones that an *unqualified* return might imply; one that’s plausible precisely because of the baggage of experience discarded. This is the dialectic you think is disastrous: inadvertently posturing as the Wise Old Fish. What you find sentimental, I find moving. Duck-Rabbit. Q.E.D.?

Back to *Dot Dot Dot*: perhaps all this points toward a renewal of interest in our founding 'discipline', graphic design. If the commonest use of the word 'design' is now analogous to a broad 'mediation' rather than the previously more specific 'problem solving' (which was still lingering when we began a decade ago), this sense seems to me to have bifurcated into two opposite poles. The first is essentially negative and more or less synonymous with *spin*, which implies deliberate twisting, obscuring, obfuscation and ambiguation. This form of mediation is concerned only with how an object (or event, or relationship) comes across, which may have little to do with its essence.

The other pole I have in mind, though, is essentially positive and more or less synonymous with *translation*. Any form of communication is rooted in the transposition from one form to another. Most obviously this could refer to the translation from one language to another, more abstractly from thought to expression, or, in our business, from a message to its linguistic/graphic form. As we noted a couple of issues ago, Anthony Froshaug wrote a nice equation for an ideal design, that consists 'in translating all the problem, set of problems, into another language, another sign system, with love.' And so we're clearly on this side of the fence.

I wholeheartedly agree with your prognosis of an enlightened self-reflexivity as being one that 'would have to risk the discovery that its own premises were untenable, and to be prepared to act radically on this knowledge.' For now, I would say that that action involves extracting ourselves from any and all quotation marks. This could equally mean a retreat from the often futile, insipid gestures of fine art, or a concerted refusal of that currently spun version of design – and to offer in its place a clearly signposted alternative, not a commodified 'alternative'.

From the horse's mouth,

Stuart

**(c) In response to an article: 'and so writing about it is accordingly elliptical'**

These ideas were carried over into what became a third surrogate editorial, 'Another Open Letter', which requires less prefacing than the last one. It's an attempt to articulate how the latter's abstractions ('extracting ourselves from quotation marks') have played out in concrete terms at the cultural end of graphic design in recent years. 'Cultural' is here typically, if always too crudely, opposed to 'commercial' – here shorthand for work traditionally made for galleries, museums, biennials and art publishers, and more recently marked by self-organized imprints, spaces, events and suchlike.

The letter is nominally addressed to the prominent design critic Rick Poynor in response to a brief Op-Ed piece of his that (rightly) criticized the wilful ambiguity and socio-political impotence of some recent activities attributed to graphic designers (wrongly) grouped under the banner of 'critical design'.[22] With Eco's drive for *discursive clarity when discourse is unclear* in mind, I argue that the defining characteristic of this marginal scene is 'lost' – intellectually invested in their base discipline yet equally disillusioned with its commercial saturation, and so searching for worthwhile application elsewhere. This seemed to me a more accurate explanation of current confusions than the 'killing of fathers' line that Poynor was spinning, and of the general spread of the grey area between art and design.

[22] As is only half-explained in the letter itself, this was written in reaction not only to Poynor's 'Observer: Critical Omissions' (*Print* magazine, October 2008: http://www.printmag.com/Article/Observer_Critical_Omissions), but also in response to a response to that piece by Zak Kyes and Mark Owens, as well as Rick's further response to *their* response. All are archived at the time of writing at the same address, and I recommend reading all three in advance of what follows in order to make the fullest sense of what was originally a closed letter that I'd decided not to send but didn't quite manage to forget about and so 'half opened' up again. The thoughts still seemed (just about) timely, and very much in line with the editorial breeze blowing through the rest of the issue. The *Forms of Inquiry* exhibition and related material referred to throughout was first assembled by Kyes and Owens at the Architectural Association in London in late 2007, then toured around Europe, efficiently tracked and now archived at http://www.formsofinquiry.com.

Dear Rick,

What follows is in response to ‘Critical Omissions’, your opinion piece for *Print* magazine about the recent use and misuse of the term ‘critical design’, with particular reference to the exhibition ‘Forms of Inquiry’. For better or worse, I hardly ever read the design press. I knew about this, however, because I happened to show up at the house of Mark Owens – one of the people implicated in the piece – while he was in the middle of drafting an impetuous response. As I both agreed and disagreed with aspects of both your comments and his reaction, I thought it worthwhile to try and pinpoint where I stand in precarious relation. The fact that I was directly mentioned as an example a couple of times in ways I thought misleading helped me muster the energy to do so.

I should also admit upfront a kind of anterior motive: I’m trying to conceive a ‘last’ issue of *Dot Dot Dot* that tries to be as clear and direct as possible about both what the publication and its constellation have come to stand for, then what it hopes to achieve with that stance, i.e. precisely the sort of explication your piece calls for. Already I suspect that what I’m about to write will still come across as wilfully ambiguous, but for now at least I’ll stick to my guns and suggest that this is mainly because when I say ‘as clear and direct as possible’, I honestly (meaning as close to ‘objectively’ as I can get) think that it isn’t that possible to articulate what I’m after very clearly and directly. I mean that the stuff at the heart of that description is inherently slippery, and so the writing about it is accordingly elliptical.

> In any case, the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear – indeed so unclear that it would be ridiculous to pretend to define them from the uncontaminated podium of rhetoric. It would only be another way of escaping reality and leaving it exactly as it is.[23]

To add to this little stack of disclaimers, first, I know relatively little about the background of the term ‘critical design’ beyond your potted history, and second, I only actually saw a half-assembled version of the Forms of Inquiry exhibition in its first incarnation at the Architectural Association. I do, however, have the book. I’m emphasizing these points only because I want to present a straightforward personal account of how the various exhibitions, books, and histories you mention actually coalesce to affect someone of moderate involvement, in order to describe the gap between how things tend to come across to others in reportage, and what really happens. I think this is the only ‘problem’ I’m trying to address here: the distorting effects of pigeonholing. My ambivalence to terms like ‘critical design’ – and exhibitions or publications dealing with it – has been fairly consistent from the early 1990s onwards, even when I was much more preoccupied with Design as a subject. For those in the corner of the generation I’ve grown up with, all that designer-as-author/editor/producer/publisher/ critic business was always at least mentally prefixed with a ‘so-called’ and some eye-rolling. James Goggin recently described this collective shrugging in a piece called ‘Practice from Everyday Life’,[24] in which he points out that the day-to-day activities of graphic designers are typically nuanced and expansive enough to render such renaming – rebranding really – unnecessary, therefore superfluous, and so (again, my main bugbear here) misleading. And as long as things are misleading, they’re harder to deal with productively, to change things for the better, so all this is in the service of constructive clarity.

My first impression of your piece and Mark’s response was that the two arguments miss each other entirely. You write: ‘if the implicit aim [of design] is simply to help clients sell more doodads, then all that matters is how effectively design achieves this goal’, to which I’d immediately respond that this is absolutely – patently – NOT the implicit aim of the work of the majority of the people contributing to such as ‘Forms of Inquiry’. Rather, these ‘designers’ are quite plainly working away, as you later

[23] Eco, op. cit., p. 157.

[24] James Goggin, ‘Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design’s Expansive Scope by its Quotidian Activities’, *Most Beautiful Swiss Books 2008* (Bern: Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 2009).

acknowledge, in various arts margins. They tend to make work that documents or otherwise organizes other people's work, sometimes their own. Selling anything – doodads or otherwise – rarely comes into it. Such work is, rather, subsidized somewhere along the cultural food chain, whether by grants and awards (particularly common in The Netherlands, Switzerland and Scandinavia) or relatively benign cultural institutions (such as the AA). I understand you're only trying to set up what 'design' tends to mean for a broad audience in order to pitch 'critical design' against it, but I think this simplification is already too much of a distortion, or at least disorienting. Further, I seriously doubt whether any of the participants would ever think of themselves as 'critical designers', which is how it comes across. (Metahaven maybe – though I can't imagine them wearing the badge voluntarily.) Such terms are only really employed by journalists and curators.

The main effect of this (your) distortion is to suggest that these 'Forms of Inquiry' participants and organizers are 'critical' towards designers who are involved in selling things. Again this is misleading: reproach has nothing whatsoever to do with this work. There's a difference between not doing something, and thinking someone else shouldn't be doing it either. The question it does raise, though, is: if neither selling doodads nor busy criticizing the selling of doodads, what are these so-called critical designers doing? Or: what do they think they're doing? What's the point? What are they after? etc.

And I think the answer is that they don't yet know what they want, other than opportunities and occupations to accommodate their interests. Their defining characteristic as a group is Lost, sometimes happily adrift, sometimes unhappily insecure. They care about working, and the nature of that work, but not particularly about either $$$ or Big Causes. They're more commonly seeking to perpetuate and share interests – in art, literature, music, and all the other usual tools for psychic survival. They're busy stabbing about looking for channels and outlets that aren't immediately obvious or might not yet exist. 'Forms of Inquiry' indexes this displacement, and any attempt, whether by its organizers or its critics, to label the pack as a whole are bound to be wide of the mark because it's fundamentally all over the place. The premise of the exhibition is supremely useless: to produce posters that engage in an 'architectural inquiry' towards no apparent end. Lacking any real sense of requiredness, that it comes across as whimsical, obscure and without urgency is hardly surprising. And yet it can't help betray a group of well-read, engaged, invested and restless minds at play. In this sense, the exhibition is completely timely – and its title weirdly apt, though not really for the reason its curators imagined.

> Journalists have conquered the book form. Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual. The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers, but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers, but distributors. The result is rapid turnover, the regime of the best seller. But there will always be a parallel circuit, a black market.[25]

From what I've seen or can gather, the exhibition is what you might expect: obfuscating, in-jokey, and full of barely articulated references. But this doesn't necessarily amount to exclusionary, elitist and wasteful. I'm inclined to accept Mark's claim that the main purpose of the show was to provide a format for people to meet, for further events to occur, and in order to organize and extend their eccentric and far-reaching reading room (despite it coming across as a supplement to the main event). And this is, it seems, precisely how the constellation (exhibition, book, reading room) has functioned – as a red herring (or a carrot) that's resulted in a number of makeshift communities (participants, audiences, institutions). Michel Foucault's term 'heterotopia' is useful here: a space where contradictions can exist, an actual place rather than a utopia, but as yet without any clear purpose other than representing something outside the status quo. At best, this is a form of criticality itself – a quiet, local declaration of independence. It's admittedly far from the public criticism and accountability you're advocating and I'm by no means against, but surely there's room for both. Perhaps the former even leads to the latter. I could sum this up by saying that these practices are, by implication, small-p political or small-c critical, working something out for and by themselves. Their attempts can function

[25] This is freely translated and paraphrased from the series of TV interviews *L'Abécédaire*, available on DVD with English subtitles by Charles J. Stivale as *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

as a public model too, just not a very spectacular or glamorous one – and so one that doesn't easily translate into column inches.

Frankly, I also find it difficult to imagine what kinds of broader channels you imagine your Dunne & Raby-like critical designers might utilize. Your prime example of Metahaven (whom I appreciate) still only operate in a pretty limited art and design ghetto, with pretty much the same insular codes as the rest of whoever might constitute a scene these days, and it's hard to conceive of any broader reach. Their 'Forms of Inquiry' poster is as impenetrable and ostensibly useless as any of the others, at least without the sort of contextualizing text that have tended to emerge later in those supplementary talks and interviews I mentioned. This is significant, and not a necessarily negative observation either, just realistic. If anything it points to the fact that the exhibition's elements are wrongly weighted in the public mind. I think this is a big problem of a lot of more or less art-domain projects these days: that where the work really lies – in the captions, the didactics, the books – is wrongly weighted, de facto relegated. Put another way: the really valuable work doesn't announce itself clearly enough as such.

In fact, designing new modes of dispersion – setting up independent channels and outlets – seems to be precisely what's occupying this bunch right now. Even within the last couple of years, enterprises like Corner College in Zurich, castillo/corrales in Paris, Bedford Press in London, Split/Fountain in Auckland, and Primary Information in New York, are all examples of small, generous, spirited groups who have collapsed production and distribution into a single, fluid activity. None of them set out with a loud Political agenda, but they end up making a quiet political point: that this is possible.

> These projects aren't exclusive and are open to anyone who is interested in their activities, but their existence doesn't rely on being connected to a global network. They don't reject that network as much as express confidence in their autonomy from it.[26]

> Often I have been asked, by Washington policy intellectuals and California environmental activists, why *Harper's Magazine* doesn't publish program notes for a brighter American future or blueprints for the building of a better tomorrow. All well and good, they say, to point to the flaws in the system, or to suggest that the leading cast members of the Bush Administration be sent to sea in open boats, but why so many jokes, and to what end the impractical criticism? Where are the helpful suggestions and the tools for forward looking reform? ... If I had answers to the questions I'd stand for elective office; as an editor I've been more interested in the play of mind than its harnessing to a political bandwagon.[27]

This brings me to the issue of our immediate prehistory of 'critical design', specifically the insinuation that our merry band of nepotists are deliberately covering over the tracks of those who preceded us in the 1980s and 1990s. Speaking again for both myself and, with some confidence, my immediate circle, the nature of the influence of such as *Emigre* magazine is similar to that of the various venues I mentioned above, i.e. the simple fact of its existence is the actual extent of its legacy. Meaning: we never really read it, engaged with it, related to it, took its 'debates' very seriously – and we don't refer to it in retrospect either. But not because we were desperate to kill fathers as you suggest – as Mark rightly points out, we were simply more fond of our grandfathers, or stepfathers, or our friends' fathers, or indeed mothers. As far as I recall, we were hungry enough to talk – just not about what *Emigre* was talking about. The U.S. art school take on French Deconstruction was hard both to swallow and take seriously (though we couldn't have articulated why until Robin Kinross did so eloquently in his pamphlet *Fellow Readers*[28]), and its supposed points of contention came across rather as storms in

[26] Anthony Huberman, 'I ~~Heart~~ Information', *Afterall*, no. 16, Autumn/Winter 2007.

[27] Lewis H. Lapham, 'Notebook: Blue Guitar', *Harper's Magazine*, May 2006.

[28] Robin Kinross, *Fellow Readers: Notes on Multiplied Language* (London: Hyphen, 1994).

teacups. As myself and others have said before, and I'm sure you can appreciate, what we turned to or tuned into instead was the scarce but deep influence of the British designer and writer Paul Elliman and not many others. This was a different kind of intelligence: luminous, full of idiosyncrasy, wit, and the 'breath of life' you once quoted him as promoting in a piece we recycled in *Dot Dot Dot* #9. So *Emigre* was an influence, yes, but no more or less than an independent record label, or a band, or your big brother doing a newspaper round in order to buy his own bike.

Though we disregarded the tradition you're making a case for (the nineties' schools: CalArts, Art Center, Rhode Island, Cranbrook), we did very much have our own, or made our own, and continue to do so. The lineage won't surprise you: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Anthony Froshaug, Norman Potter, Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, Jean-Luc Godard, Vladimir Nabokov – and on to Barney Bubbles, Muriel Cooper, Richard Hamilton, and everyone else that crops up irregularly in our publication and related projects. The key quality common to these mavericks, I think, is that, whether within a single discipline, or spanning two or three at once, they're all generalists, polymaths; their work seems at once technically specific and broadly allusive. Mark Owens, for instance, recently wrote a piece about Californian post-punk band The Germs as a way of pointing at the existence and discussing the nature of these alternative histories and entry points outside the canon.

> Throbbing changes, stops and starts, revisions and omissions, additions and ambivalences emanating from a corpuscular network resist any monopolizing thematic analysis. The process ensures that its strengths always will reside in specificities.[29]

Finally, by way of explaining this generation's supposed dismissal of its predecessors, you write that 'it's just the latest example of graphic design's endemic lack of faith in its own worthiness' and that 'Art and architecture [are] conspicuous sources of envy among the new critical designers – many of their projects are for artists.' Now, I'd be the first to agree with the lack of faith in the (canonical version of) graphic design's worthiness, as well as to suggest that this lack is justified (by its basic surplus, superfluous aspect). But it doesn't automatically follow that the individuals involved are sitting around self-flagellating. First, I'd argue that the apparent lack of available channels to produce work that these 'designers' might consider worthwhile simply forces them to look further afield. And so, as we're seeing, they become writers, editors, printers, publishers, distributors, shop owners, event organizers – all practical extensions of previous roles, taking matters into their own hands.

There's a great line (I forget who wrote it, though if it wasn't Marshall McLuhan it might as well have been) about a railroad company in the U.S. going bust because they made the mistake of thinking they were in the business of railroads rather than transportation. It's easy enough to apply this to what I'm talking about, and say that we're all just trying to stay focused on the fact that we're in the business of communication rather than graphic design. Second, I don't see why working on projects with or for artists or architects equals envy. I can understand why a fair proportion of our generation or circle or whatever feel closer to the more playful, exuberant legacies of conceptual art than, say, the sadly scarce residue of semiotics or information design, but I think you're closer to describing the real character of the current state of affairs when acknowledging the importance afforded to collaboration and community. The affirmative persistence of the drive to participate and communicate … these are the 'politics' at stake here. In short, the bonds seem far more prevalent and relevant than the divisions, and what is actually happening far more prevalent and relevant – and thankfully less watertight – than the terms used to describe it.

> I abhor averages.
> I like the specific case.[30]

[29] Dustin Ericksen, 'The Red Crayola/The Red Krayola: An Approachable Subject', *Afterall*, no. 19, 2008.

[30] Louis Brandeis quoted in: Larissa Harris, ed., *The Curse of Bigness*, exhibition catalogue, Queens Museum of Art, 2010, p. 237. See also §8.1.

**(d) In response to an exhibition: 'a very particular graphic Esperanto'**

Since around *Dot Dot Dot*'s half-life, I (and later we) have assembled a number of exhibitions of original artefacts that were at some point reproduced as images in the journal's pages – record covers, paintings, photographs, and other items that typically illustrate the essays. Initially, there were three barely-formed reasons for doing so. First: to set in motion a permanent, and permanently itinerant, collection that would continually expand as new objects were prompted by new texts. Second: to set ourselves the productive problem of appropriately captioning the whole thing; to write a whole at least equal to the sum of its parts. And third: to understand the impulse to start such an endeavour in the first place. The pilot version in Tallinn (2005) duly comprised some 20 or 30 items stuck to the load-bearing columns of a large, dilapidated space. To inaugurate the show, my original co-editor Peter Bilak and I hosted a one-off walk-through, relating abbreviated versions of the essays behind the objects.[31]

As usual, the plan didn't play out as neatly as imagined. Because the objects cost so much to ship around, and given that gallery wallspace wasn't exactly forthcoming in the beginning, a few of the first iterations of this emphatically material collection were ironically forced into more or less immaterial formats. The second occasion, for instance, consisted of a corollary collection of digital images 'captioned' by a pre-recorded lecture at the annual *Festival d'Affiches* in Chaumont, France (2005). Inasmuch as the founding physical collection is more or less flat (in order that the pieces can be framed and so more conveniently protected, shipped and displayed), the Chaumont talk was conceived as an opportunity to assemble an equivalent collection of stuff that was relatively rare, expensive, 3D, or otherwise difficult to acquire. The talk was reproduced in a book published on the occasion of the festival, and then typically folded into the upcoming issue of *Dot Dot Dot* (#11).[32]

In this talk, I claim that 'the majority of what passes for graphic design doesn't really stick to any reasonable notion of form following function' but tends to 'fuck' it instead. With the benefit of ten years' hindsight this seems a bit much, but what I think I was getting at is that contemporaneous graphic design is more commonly marked by a discrepancy between form and meaning. In other words, the relationship seems equivocal and contrived rather than intrinsic and inevitable.

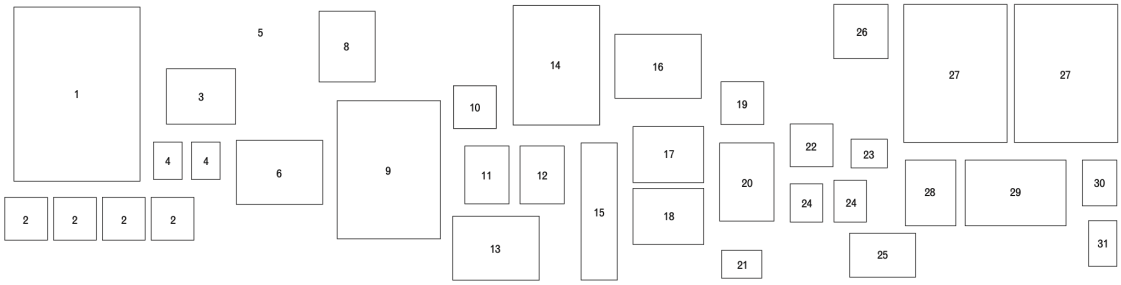
The third exhibition was also immaterial, on this occasion supplanted by a handful of films in Utrecht (2005).[33] The fourth, however, was a much-expanded assemblage of the physical collection back on a wall and supported by a substantial budget at the 2007 Lyon Biennial.[34] All subsequent iterations more or less resemble the format established in Lyon: a large salon-style hang with some particular and usually less than satisfactory attempt to caption it. There, for instance, it was accompanied by a numbered, *Sgt. Pepper*-style outline diagram that referred the objects back to their founding essays in back issues of *Dot Dot Dot*.

[31] We decided to title each installation of the collection progressively by letters to parallel the journal's numbers – but they often had subtitles, too. This first one at Kaleri Tartu in Tallin, Estonia, 2–9 April, 2005, for instance, was called *DDDA: Edasi Olevikku [We Shift Gear Into Present Tense].* This set off a further tradition of titling first in the local language, often dubiously translated from an English original.

[32] Stuart Bailey, *DDDB: Peu importe les conneries (d'aprés Jamie Reid) [Never Mind the Bollocks (after Jamie Reid)]*, reproduced in Paul Elliman and Maxine Kopsa (eds.), *Dutch Resource* (Arnhem: Valiz & Werkplaats Typografie, 2005); republished in *Dot Dot Dot* #11, 2006. It begins: 'A couple of years ago I was invited to give a talk at some event in Barcelona, replacing Jamie Reid who had pulled out at the last minute. I decided to use the opportunity to present a collection of friends' work that I admired. Upon realizing this didn't amount to very much, the idea stretched to encompass a general collection of work from the past century by a gang of both dead and living spirits who made work with some common link; a bond – like an umbilical cord – stretching through the 20th century from some anonymous modernist mother. I might reluctantly describe this work as being cerebral, rigorous and worthy, if those words weren't so cerebral-, rigorous- and worthy-sounding. So instead maybe: charged, luminous and illuminating, like a series of momentary cartoon light bulbs flashing on and off above my head.'

[33] *DDDC: Stel me een retorische vraag [Ask me a rhetorical question]: an involuted composite film evening, 1963–73*, Casco, Utrecht, 19 November, 2005. This line is drawn from one of the films, Andy Warhol's *Beauty no. 2* (1965), in which off-camera Chuck Wein invites a drunken Edie Sedgwick to 'Ask me a rhetorical question … see if you can get an answer.'

[34] *DDDD (Untitled),* 2007 Lyon Biennial, 19 September 2007 – 6 January, 2008.




1. see: Louis Lüthi & Radim Peško, 'Mitim (Gamma)' in DDD13, 2006 (source: Louis Lüthi & Radim Pesko, type specimen screenprint, 2007)
2. see: Stuart Bailey, 'Equation for a Composite Design (2): Best Of' in DDD8, 2004 (source: Wire, *Pink Flag* LP, 1977; *Chairs Missing* LP, 1978; *154* LP, 1979; *On Returning* compilation LP, 1989)
3. see: Paulina Ołowska, 'Ci Vu Parolas Esperanton?' in DDD5, 2002, (source: Esperanto motto screen, 2005)
4. see: Mark Owens & David Reinfurt, 'Group Theory (A Short Course in Relational Aesthetics)' in DDD7, 2003 (source: Total Design publicity photograph, 1982)
5. see: Mark Owens, 'Graphics Incognito' in DDD12, 2006 (source: Raymond Pettibon, Black Flag logo, c.1990 / Muriel Cooper, MIT Press logo, c.1970, adhesive vinyl)
6. see: David Reinfurt, 'Global Branding' in DDD8, 2004 / Stuart Bailey, 'Elemental Mathematics' in DDD9, 2004 (source: 'Money' spread from *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, 1972)
7. see: Ryan Gander, 'Hergé's Realisation…' in DDD9, 2004 (source: Ryan Gander, *Hergé's realisation that Alph-Art was conceptually flawed, Georges Remi's realisation that Alph-Art was conceptually flawed and Kuifjé's realisation that Alph-Art was conceptually flawed*, dry transfer, 2003)
8. see: Will Holder, 'These Woodcuts Could Safeguard a Nation!' in DDD9, 2004 (source: Edward Wadsworth, dazzle ship woodcut, c.1920; lithographic proof, c. 1970)
9. see: Louis Kaplan, 'Hanging Up Moholy' in DDD13, 2006 (source: Dexter Sinister, *Blazon for Moholy-Nagy*, lithograph, 2007)
10. see: Sytze Steenstra, 'David Byrne: Getting the I Out of Design' in DDD4, 2001 (source: Robert Rauschenberg design for Talking Heads, *Speaking in Tongues* LP, 1983)
11. see: Stuart Bailey, 'Wyndham Lewis' in DDD11, 2005 (source: Chris Evans, *Wyndham Lewis*, airbrush painting, 2005)
12. see: Michael Bracewell & Jon Wilde, 'Mark E Smith' in DDD11, 2005 (source: Chris Evans, *Mark E Smith*, airbrush painting, 2005)
13. see: Rob Giampietro, 'Collected Words' in DDD14, 2007 (source: Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1983)
14. see: David Greene, Samantha Hardingham & John Morgan Studio, 'I.U.' in DDD11, 2005 (source: John Morgan Studio, poster for the Invisible University, screenprint, 2005)
15. see: Gerard Byrne, '1984 and Beyond' in DDD13, 2006 / Emily Pethick, 'On 1984 and Beyond' in DDD13, 2006 (source: Gerard Byrne, *On 1984 and Beyond*, photograph, 2007)
16. see: David Reinfurt, 'Post-Master' in DDD12, 2006 / David Reinfurt, 'Superdollars' in DDD14, 2007 (source: Portrait of Benjamin Franklin, etching, c. 1770; photograph, 2007 / Tony Law, *Trying to find flaws, if any, in an enlargement of a 'superdollar'*, photograph for *The New York Times*, July 23, 2006)
17. see: Steve Rushton, 'Like Sailors on the Open Sea' in DDD14, 2007 (source: Otto Neurath, *Strikes and Lockouts* in the section 'Society and Economy' of *Atlas*, 1930; facsimile print, 2007; courtesy Stroom, The Hague)
18. see: Stuart Bailey, 'Equation for a Composite Design (1): Two Ideologies' in DDD8, 2004 (source: Stuart Bailey, *Two Ideologies*, Merry Pranksters 'Furthur' LSD blotter, c. 1970 / Sex Pistols, *Pretty Vacant* 45" single, 1977)
19. see: Diedrich Diederichsen, 'AA Philosophy' in DDD8, 2004 (source: Scritti Politti, *Asylums in Jerusalem|Jacques Derrida* 12" single, 1983)
20. see: Katrine Herian, 'Obituaries 1999' in DDD11, 2005 (source: Katrine Herian, from the series *Obituaries 1999*, silver gelatin print, 1999)
21. see: Paulina Ołowska, 'Bauhaus Yoga' in DDD6, 2002 (source: Paulina Ołowska, photograph of *Bauhaus Yoga* performance at Botanic Garden, Inverleith House, Edinburgh, 2001; courtesy Cabinet gallery, London)
22. see: Stuart Bailey, 'On Graphic Design, 1982' in DDD2, 2001 / Stuart Bailey, 'On Graphic Design, 1979' in DDDX, 2005 (source: XTC, *Go2* LP, 1979)
23. see: Stuart Bailey, Alice Fisher & Ryan Gander, 'Little Bastard (The Invention and Introduction of a New Word)' in DDD11, 2005 (source: Ryan Gander, *The Spoilt Brat of the Dictionary – But One It'll Never Enter*, photograph, 2005)
24. see: Howard Singerman, 'Extended Caption' in DDD14, 2007 (source: Alfred H. Barr, page from *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York, MoMA, 1936 / Mike Kelley, sketch for *Entry Way (Genealogical Chart)*, 1995; courtesy Kelley Studio)
25. see: 'Paul Elliman, 'City Turned Upside Down' in DDD8, 2004 (source: Harry Beck, sketch for the London Underground map, c.1930; photograph courtesy Ken Garland, 2004)
26. see: Paul Elliman, 'A–Z, 0–9, Yes/No' in DDD13, 2006 (source: Paul Elliman, *Ouija Board for Josef Albers*, hardboard, 2002)
27. see: Seth Price, 'Décor Holes' in DDD13, 2006 (source: Seth Price & Dexter Sinister, *Courtesy of Seth Price (Mallarmé)*, lithograph, 2007 / Seth Price & Dexter Sinister, *Courtesy of Seth Price (Broodthaers)*, lithograph, 2007)
28. see: Maxine Kopsa, 'Dear Dear Dear Kippenberger' in DDD11, 2005 (source: Martin Kippenberger, *Untitled*, 1995, pencil on hotel stationery; courtesy Estate Martin Kippenberger / Galerie Gisela Capitain)
29. see: Justin Beal, 'Decoration*' in DDD14, 2007 (source: Justin Beal, *Decoration*, photograph, 2007)
30. see: Paul Elliman, 'A Late Evening in the Future' in DDD5, 2002 (Paul Elliman, *The Shipping Forecast*, faxed drawing, 2002)
31. see: Kim Levine, 'Doing Nothing (A Conversation with Eugene Menard)' in DDD2, 2001 (source: Eugene Menard, *Butcher's Bar, London EC1*, photograph, 2001)

After Lyon, the installations were increasingly conceived as teaching set-ups. Meanwhile, we also started to publish, in a motley range of formats, a written account of the collection. What we started to think of as an 'extended caption' was as sprawling and palimpsest as its subject, usually accompanied by a scale reproduction of the latest arrangement of the wall. The project now advanced by oscillating between text and exhibition, the next one always based on the vicissitudes of the last.[35]

And so the latest, most substantial version of this extended caption found its way into that final *Dot Dot Dot*. It was conceived as a kind of Last Word on the collection (before being shelved for good in The Serving Library; more on this below) – and so, too, a last surrogate editorial in the form of an illustrated transcription of a voiceover that played throughout a show of the artefacts at Kunstverein,

[35] In exhaustive chronological order, subsequent incarnations of the collection took the following forms: a single-day seminar spent 'disambiguating' the wall, *DDDE: Begriffsklärung [Disambiguation]*, Kunstverein Munich, 24 May – 1 June, 2008; the first attempt to account for the wall in words, 'DDDF (Untitled)', *Map*, no. 15, Autumn 2008; a public conversation with Jan Verwoert on the opening night of *DDDG: Extended Caption*, Culturgest Porto, 25 April – 27 June, 2009; a large-format printed sheet, *DDDH (Untitled)*, made in Paris as part of a 'printed exhibition by Christophe Lemaitre, *Répétition dans l'épilogue*, c. Winter 2009/10; a public workshop, 'On Library, Archive and "Service"', alongside the exhibition *DDDI (Untitled)*, Office for Contemporary Art, Oslo, 2 December 2009 – mid-February, 2010; a framed version of the broadsheet *DDDH* hung alongside the latest version of the caption as *DDDK (Untitled)*,within the group exhibition *Between Sight and Sound*, Green on Red, Dublin, 6–29 May, 2010; as a fold-out section in a catalogue of events at the Kunstverein Munich, 'DDDL (Untitled)', in Stefan Kalmár, ed., *Be Nice Share Everything Have Fun: Kunstverein München 2005–2009* (Cologne: Walther König, 2010); and finally for now, the written version reproduced below, 'DDDM: If you stuck a tag on them …', *Dot Dot Dot* #20, 2010. (The missing 'J' must have fallen through the cracks of this haphazard program.) Somewhere around this point we dropped the alphabetical coding as the collection and teaching became fuzzily folded into our nascent institution, The Serving Library (see the last part of the present chapter). However, we carried on programming the same bunch of stuff in the same vein: a series of seminars under the rubric 'Applied Art' within *A Model of The Serving Library* at Kunstverein Amsterdam, 29 May – 24 July, 2010; a two-day workshop and panel discussion along with the exhibition *Re-Applied Art*, LiveInYourHead, Geneva, 4–24 November, 2010; a six-week summer school titled 'From the Toolbox of a Serving Library' within the exhibition *The Serving Library*, Walter Philips Gallery, Visual Arts Department, The Banff Centre, 10 July – 4 September, 2011; an 'expo' version (in advance of finding a permanent home) also titled *The Serving Library*, Artists Space, New York, 20 October – 15 January, 2012; a hang of new items acquired since *Bulletins of The Serving Library* took over from *Dot Dot Dot* within the exhibition programme *The End(s) of the Library* at The Goethe-Institut Library, New York, 1 April – 21 June, 2013; and an installation within an altered version of French architect Claude Parent's 'Art Hill' structure, *The Serving Library*, Tate Liverpool, 7 November 2014 – 8 February, 2015.

Amsterdam.[36] The text tracks the sequence of works arranged within its boxy apartment interior by artist Giles Bailey, who also lent his voice to what was essentially an 'audio guide' that played on a loop throughout the space for the duration. This is what he read:

The title is overheard from a short film, *Pulmo Marina*, by Aurélien Froment:

> If you stuck a tag on them to track them the way certain fish are tagged these days they would sink instantly.

The opening quote is from Stefan Themerson's *General Piesc*, a story in which the General finds happiness only when he has forgotten his mission:

> The Greek males thought geometry was the thing. Dr Zamenhof thought Esperanto was the thing. Jesus-Christ thought the dialectical loaf of bread was the thing. And geometry produced bazookas. And polyglotism produced more quarrels. And love produced hatred. And none of these great things has proved to be more (what is the right word) *efficacious* (?) than what I, in my female way, would like to call 'good manners'.[37]

This is the 13th occasion of showing this group of artefacts, or pictures of those artefacts, whose only objective connection is that they have appeared in the pages of *Dot Dot Dot* at some point since its conception in the year 2000. This collection of source material was first assembled in 2004. By source material, I mean the original items represented in print by screened images. In the regular hierarchy of the magazine, texts are generally primary and images secondary, and the fundamental idea of these exhibitions was to invert these roles, as a kind of parallel operation.

The magazine's contributors rarely write directly about how this kind of cultural residue looks, but draw on it rather to trigger, illustrate, or reference broader sociological, philosophical or art-historical ideas. Take the cover of Scritti Politti's 1982 double A-side single hanging at the top of the stairs, featuring the song 'Jacques Derrida', for example.[38]



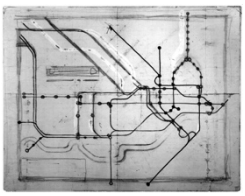
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This image accompanies a piece by Diedrich Diederichsen which, rather than discussing either the music, lyrics, or sleeve design, more broadly recounts a moment in the eighties when a certain strain of British post-punk enjoyed the same intellectual currency as French pop philosophy. Or to the right of 'Derrida,' next to the door, the upside down photograph of an early sketch of Harry Beck's 1931 London Underground map.

[36] Dexter Sinister, *A Model of The Serving Library*, Kunstverein, Amsterdam, 29 May – 24 July, 2010.

[37] Stefan Themerson, *General Piesc* (London: Gaberbocchus, 1976). See also §7.5 and §7.8.

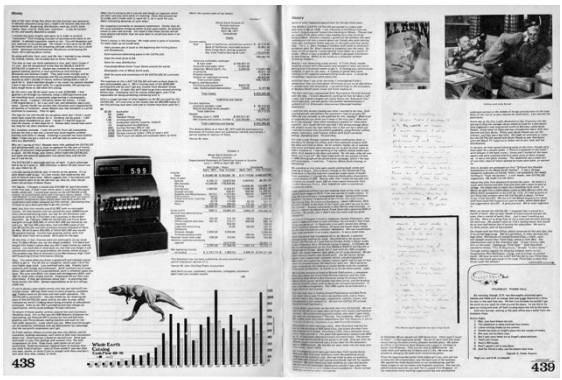
[38] All architectural references – such as the 'stairs' here – refer to the interior of Kunstverein. The numbers adjacent each image note the issue of *Dot Dot Dot* where they originally appeared.



8

The sketch itself was accidentally hung the wrong way up when first exhibited at the V&A, effectively prioritizing its abstract qualities over its representational ones. Paul Elliman introduces this anecdote to frame some thoughts around the idea that abstraction – and by extension modernism – was only acceptable to the British public when grounded in function. Let's move on.

Another sense in which images are secondary in the magazine is that they're often second-rate. By which I mean poor quality, black and white, and printed on uncoated paper, which reduces definition. This is partly practical, as we've never really been able to afford decent photography or colour printing, but also in deliberate reaction to how 'graphics' were typically reproduced in the eighties and nineties – as seductive full-colour surfaces that barely began to relate the stickier and generally more compelling substance underneath. In other words, these images were only skin-deep. Our response was to downplay the surface in an attempt to get at the depth through the writing. A good example of this, behind the door, is the 'Money' spread with images of an antique cash register, dinosaur and bar chart, from the 1969 edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, a kind of seventies counterculture *Yellow Pages*.




8

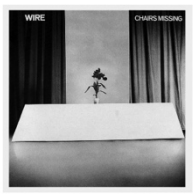
This has appeared twice in the magazine. First as an illustration to David Reinfurt's three-page single-sentence biography of Stewart Brand, who founded and edited the *Catalog*. Then alongside a short piece on the cover of the subsequent issue about candid editorials and the economic oxymoron of independent publishing. This particular spread of the *Catalog* relates the publication's financial mechanics by presenting its own accounts – a gesture towards editorial transparency in line with its general D.I.Y. ethos.

The mediocre scan of this spread that accompanies both pieces in the magazine is, then, foremost a kind of evidence – an 'Exhibit A' – which at best offers an impression of the *Catalog*'s unique scrappiness. In the physical exhibition, however, actual pages are torn from an original copy and its maverick production process is now tangible: pages assembled on the fly according to a distinctly west coast stoner logic, marked by hole-plugging idiosyncrasies such as the short story that runs across the bottom right-hand corner of each page, all set on thin newsprint, cheap and low-bulk, once timely, now quickly browning and fading. Stripped of its explanatory text in the magazine, the object is left to speak for itself, and as part of the bigger group is forced to interact with the other objects, like a bunch of strange kids in a playground.

So what you're looking at here is, at its most allusive (and ignoring for a moment the obvious contradiction) a claim against representation which amounts to *Dot Dot Dot*'s very particular conception of modernism: a faith in objects rather than pictures of objects. This could be transposed to *experience over convenience* – and by extension perhaps *conversation over monologue* or *community over individual*, too. This is why it seems useful to regard this collection with that opening quote from Stefan Themerson in mind – a statement profoundly modernist in both spirit and rhetoric.

Applied to this collection, then, Themerson's manners are manifest in a certain (what is the right word) *momentum* (?). Its common denominator is a way of thinking – an approach, an attitude – in line with Themerson's alacrity and good humour. I'm clearly grasping for words and left wanting here, but what I'm getting at is more efficiently summed up by those Wire LPs hung on the East wall at knee height, running chronologically from 1977's *Pink Flag* to the 1989 best-of composite *On Returning*. This is one of the easier-to-relate reasons for collecting and showing this stuff: if you look hard enough it actually moves.








8

Like 'modernism', the word 'aesthetic' has been eroded, aggregated, and flattened beyond useful distinction. Its earlier reference to something approaching 'the emotional-sensory reaction to visual stimuli' – or more simply 'having an experience' – has by now been diluted to little more than a euphemism for 'formal'. The objects sought after here, though, are those I could imagine might combine or curdle to invoke that original sense of the word.

Two items are rooted in a magazine piece called 'Equation for a Composite Design,' which comprises a pair of 'ideological buses', high up in the top right hand corner of the East wall next to the window.





8

On the left is a square of miniature replications of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters' notorious mid-sixties hippy van (immortalized by Tom Wolfe), with its lovingly misspelled destination FURTHUR painted over the front windscreen. And on the right, one from a Jamie Reid Sex Pistols collage bound for NOWHERE. When it came to tracking down material carriers of these immaterial images, the Pistols' vehicle was easy enough, printed on the reverse of the sleeve for 'Pretty Vacant', which reached number 6 in 1977, and so pretty ubiquitous in second-hand record shops. Its psychedelic equivalent was less apparent, at least until I came across a cartoon of Kesey's bus on a piece of LSD blotter art. This could still be bought – unloaded – from his son Zane in Berkeley, California. The blotter art arrived ready-perforated into single trips and signed by old Pranksters – an odd counterpoint to the drab coffee rings that stained the Pistols' single.

The morning after the first incarnation of the show in Estonia, a corner of ten tabs had been carefully torn off – most probably by the gang of itinerant Russians who had been hanging about all night, according to the locals. Later the piece was lost, perhaps seized, on a flight to London, and so a new sheet had to be ordered from Zane.

Extra-formal accidents, such as these inadvertent allusions to psychedelics and stimulants, suggest something of the reason for actually gathering rather than merely depicting these items; setting up the conditions for something other to occur. Further examples of particularly loaded objects include, opposite the buses on the West wall, the indigo stencil print of Muriel Cooper's pioneering 1977 self-portrait-by-Polaroid-simultaneously-video-imaged-and-printed.



12, 15

Or, further along and below, Paul Elliman's 2001 ouija board for Josef Albers, originally made for a séance at Yale, which utilizes the Bauhausler's 1926 modular typeface, stencil-cut from a piece of square hardboard the same format and medium Albers used for his colour paintings.



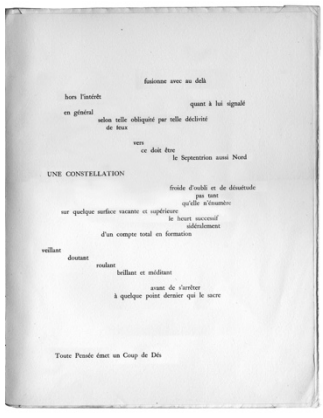
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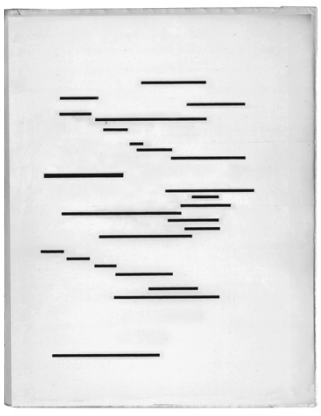
And at the end of the same wall, Jason Fulford's small 2007 *Droste effect* C-Print of an Ulrich Roski album cover, along with a test Polaroid of the same image incorporated to fold time into the equation of its own production.




17

The buses are an example of two objects arriving in reverse, by excavating a single worldly object back from a multiplied image. A similar pair are the juxtaposed versions of what appear to be proportionally-enlarged scans of original pages from Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal 1897 poem, 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance,' and Marcel Broodthaers' 1969 adaptation, which abstracts and/or censors Mallarmé's arrangement, subtitled 'Image' in relation to the original 'Text.'



Courtesy of Seth Price Courtesy of Seth Price

13

Again these scans have both appeared in juxtaposition twice in *Dot Dot Dot*: on the first occasion accompanying if not exactly illustrating a text, 'About Nothing', by Peter Bilak; and more recently alongside Seth Price's 'Décor Holes,' a loose history of sampling, with Mallarmé and Broodthaers as one thread of its prehistory. Price writes:

> Broodthaers claims and then augments Mallarmé's poem to produce a new, third body, a field between the works. The whole is without novelty, save the spacing of one's reading; the blanks, in effect, assume importance. The madness of the 'a self-annihilating nothing' prescription. But this was only to be expected since Broodthaers was an imitation artist. It may be that the supreme triumph of this validity is to cast doubt on its own validity, mixing a deep scandalous laughter with the religious spirit.[39]

Before their inclusion alongside his piece in *Dot Dot Dot*, however, Price digitally altered the Mallarmé and Broodthaers scans, cutting, pasting, and minimally reconfiguring the lines to open up a fourth field. The pages were then captioned 'Courtesy of Seth Price' in modest reference to the conceit, and this particular line of sampling further protracted here through their reproduction as metre-high capital-A Art lithographs framed for the wall. To clarify: these are blown-up facsimiles of two pages from the magazine rather than the original books, and any blanks, gaps, fields, and grey areas between these various generations of images, formats, mediums and media are imprecisely where any new work lies.

On the face of it, there's no reason to assume these objects should share any formal characteristics, because (a) their umbilical texts have been written by a wide range of people, with different backgrounds and interests, at different times across the past decade, and (b) *Dot Dot Dot* has no particular aesthetic mandate. In fact, anything approaching an ethos would rather stand against any kind of prescribed or standardized style in favour of unique form drawn from specific content. Such as David Osbaldeston's 2008 *Diagram for a Search Engine*, which is above and slightly to the right of (Mallarmé/Broodthaers)/Price.

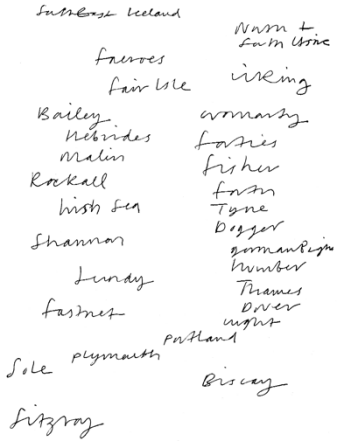


16

– which both mocks and affirms the romantic gesture of its medium, the woodcut, as well as its rhetoric, the heroic avant-garde polemic. And yet it seems disingenuous to deny the blatant graphic synchronicities across the collection. The trouble is that the nature of these synchronicities is as profoundly difficult to articulate as they are easy to perceive. This is because they are primarily cerebral not visual, more abstract than concrete, and again most accurately considered 'ways of thinking' made manifest. Perhaps this is why definition is so elusive: because abstraction lends itself to opening up spaces rather than delimiting them. Or 'And … and … and …,' as Mark Owens quoted John Rachman paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze back in *Dot Dot Dot* #12.

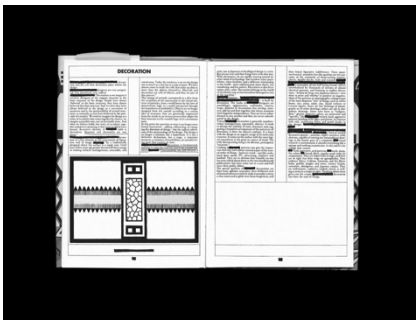
One recurring graphic strain here is, of course, abstraction itself – to various ends. A poetic, 'soft' form is described by the two transformations in the Mallarmé and Broodthaers works. Or facing this pair on the opposite wall next to the door, Paul Elliman's handwritten outline of the British coastline, faxed from London in 2002, which traces the regional waters famously relayed during BBC Radio 4's midnightly Shipping Forecast.

[39] Seth Price, 'Dispersion', op. cit. (unpaginated).



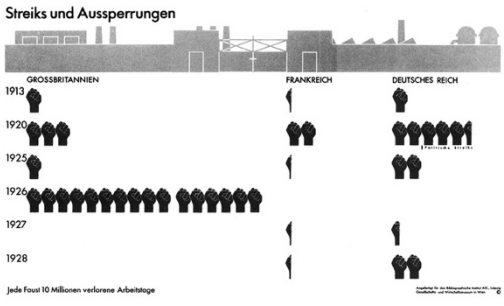

5

And also the adjacent spread from Ettore Sottsass's statement on 'Decoration' as doctored by Justin Beal in 2007; the book abstracted as photograph, statement as image.




14

Moving further to the left on this East wall, a more applied, 'hard' abstraction is found in the transformation of statistics to serial graphic information in the two Isotype charts. The top one, for example, presents the relative numbers of workers' 'Strikes and Lockouts' – symbolized by red fists – in Britain, France and Germany from 1913 to 1928.




14

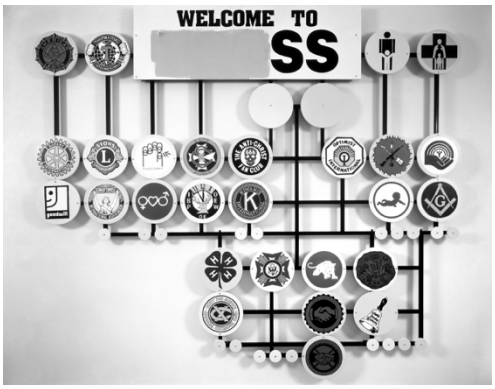
Or in the unwitting sister logos by Muriel Cooper for the MIT Press in 1963, and Raymond Pettibon for his brother's hardcore band Black Flag, circa 1978,

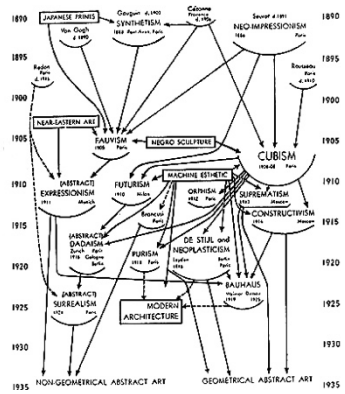


12

drawn together by Mark Owens in his piece 'Graphics Incognito' to make the unlikely point that De Stijl-inspired graphic reduction is intrinsically bound up in the community, fluidity and Calvinist work ethic of both MIT and Black Flag.

A couple of items now missing from the wall remain anecdotally conspicuous. One was a rough sketch by Mike Kelley for his 1995 work, *Entry Way (Genealogical Chart)*, a bizarre fictional town sign which substitutes the usual emblems of Rotary Clubs and Women's Institutes for a far more esoteric, personal assemblage, including the Rainbow People's Party, Ding Dong School, Optimist International, and the local Goodwill thrift store.




14

This was originally adjacent Alfred Barr's classic 1936 diagrammatic history of 'Cubism and Abstract Art', and both have since been replaced by Barney Bubbles's electric-abstract portrait of John Cooper Clarke. As Howard Singerman writes in his own 'Extended Caption' to the juxtaposition of Barr and Kelley, these two formative histories represent a fundamental shift – from Barr's neat, linear teleology to Kelley's messy, lateral association; a switch in social epistemology from Freudian patriarchy to something much looser, more random, self-determined, nebulous, amorphous, and without obvious hierarchy – a condition where family and order are supplanted by friendship and interest. Curiously, like much of the content that lies in the stories behind the items here, this two-in-one piece was at once 'about' the work it describes as well as 'about' the nature of the context that frames it here. In other words, Kelley's 'genealogical chart' diagrams the nature of the collection it belongs to.

A second absence is located in the gap below the Whole Earth money spread, which originally hung over Ryan Gander's 2004 triptych, *Georges Remi's realisation that Alph-Art was conceptually flawed, Hergé's realisation that Alph-Art was conceptually flawed, and Kuifje's realisation that Alph-Art was conceptually flawed*.



9

– a tiny cartoon, serially repeated three times in letraset, composed from the lines and stars that render a character dazed and confused in a comic strip. This piece of conceptual melancholy refers to the plot of the last, unfinished Tintin cartoon, which involved the invention and subsequent theft of a mysterious 'Alph-Art', but was interrupted by death of Tintin's creator Hergé, a pseudonym of Georges Remi, whose real-life nickname was Kuifje: a Russian Doll of authorship.

The triptych was withdrawn after an argument with Ryan about the dubious status of his work in relation to the whole, particularly as articulated through information surrounding the show, i.e. whether the exhibition was presented as a collection of independent pieces, or a single piece comprised of composite parts; as a general group show, or one with an explicit curatorial theme. And by extension, who was being represented, exactly: the individual artists, the group of artists, *Dot Dot Dot*, its editor, or Dexter Sinister, its publisher. I didn't really have a good answer, or rather I had a non-answer: that the only intention in this respect was to present something – for better or worse – outside any of those designations. This didn't assuage him, so we pulled the piece.

I realized, though, that one immediate effect of this collection is to level regular distinctions anyway – between high and low, expensive and cheap, rare and ubiquitous, limited and mass-produced, old and new, exclusive and available, famous and anonymous, canonical and overlooked. All are lowered or

elevated to the same plane. The vertical strip of photographs of science fiction writers from a 1963 group interview in *Playboy*, ‘On 1984 and Beyond’, is an extension of a work of the same name by Gerard Byrne, which has assumed a number of different formats since 2005.




14

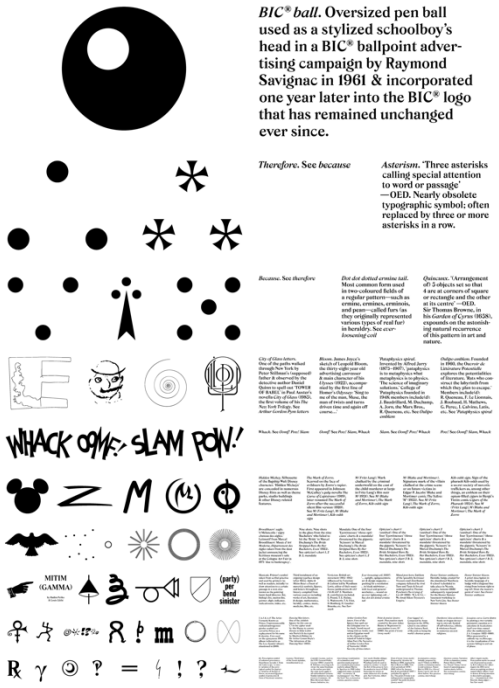
Similarly wary of its new status in regard to this odd collection, Gerard emphasized only that I should clearly present it as, quote, ‘an “illustration” of an aspect of the work, rather than “the work” itself’. Here he summarizes the potential violence of the whole project: that all this levelling is in danger of ironing out the very particular poetry inherent to each individual work in the first place. To recompense, the violence has to be justified by a counter-violent trade-off – or, less dramatically put, a guarantee that the sum is at least as good or ideally greater than its parts.

Now moving through to the front room, on the West wall to the left of the mirror, this ‘hard abstraction’ is most succinctly applied in a proof of one of Edward Wadsworth’s 1918 woodcut illustrations of a Dazzle Ship – a war artist recording the practical abstract camouflage used by the British navy in order to confuse and delay the enemy’s recognition of their target.



9

Facing this on the wall behind the door, Raymond Savignac’s Bic logo – supposedly a ‘stylized schoolboy’s head’ – heralds a whole other collection of symbols and their parallel, shrinking definitions. The whole was originally conceived in 2006 as a kind of modern type specimen for a supplement to *Dot Dot Dot*’s house font Mitim, which resuscitates a number of obscure literary, mathematical, scientific and other symbols. Its co-authors Radim Peško and Louis Lüthi reformatted the page into this metre-high screenprint in order to ensure the tail-end paragraphs were finally legible.




13

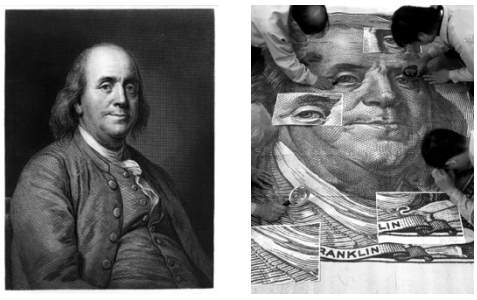
This explains its scale and latitude (at eye level) in relation to the other items, and again the individual piece mirrors aspects of the larger collection: the binaries of image & text, evidence & explication, form & content, surface & depth, and so on.

The group has become unwittingly dominated by pairs, doubles and juxtapositions: I've already noted the buses, the (Mallarmé/Broodthaers)/Price pages and MIT/Black Flag logos, but in this front room between the mirror and window, see also Chris Evans's dual airbrush portraits of Mark E. Smith and Wyndham Lewis from 2005.



11

They were originally painted to illustrate a couple of interchangeable biographies – the newer Lewis piece based line-for-line on an older Smith one – as a time-travelling alignment of ostensibly kindred spirits. And facing them are two portraits of Benjamin Franklin.



12, 14

On the left, a classic 1783 engraving which fronted David Reinfurt's compressed account of Franklin's prescient networking as original 'Post-Master' of the U.S.; and on the right, the same image on a dollar bill under scrutiny for forgery in 2006, which accompanied the same writer's account of fake North Korean 'Superdollars' two issues later.

During a public disambiguation of a previous wall instalment in Lyon, Jan Verwoert pointed out an apparent contradiction concerning transparency and opacity, which seems pivotal in terms of making sense of the various forces at play here.

To reiterate, both publication and collection stand to perpetuate a trajectory of independent, critical modernist movement – and are perhaps chasing a new word for it. Founded on the inclination to understand and relate how things really work, including vested interests, this self-reflexive impulse works towards exposing the mechanics of form, oscillating between container and contained. All of which is grounded in social, moral and ethical purpose (or can be). And so we're back to Themerson's good manners.

Recall the Isotype chart as one of the more obvious canonical (if still marginal) examples of this 'transparent' tradition – originally part of an inter-war travelling exhibition that propagated social awareness on an international scale. Or, played out as pop, Robert Rauschenberg's design for the first edition of Talking Heads' 1983 *Speaking in Tongues* LP between the North-facing windows of the front room.



4

This is a plastic collage assembled from three acetate circles that combine with the record's translucent vinyl to form a full-colour image – a concerted reflection of the album's mesh of glossolalic references, as Sytze Steenstra points out in his article on 'Getting the "I" out of design'. And more transparent still, back next to the Dazzle Ship, Hipgnosis's watershed 1978 album cover for XTC's *Go2* album, with its deadpan deconstruction of its own conceit: 'This is a RECORD COVER. This writing is the DESIGN upon the record cover. The DESIGN is to help SELL the record. We hope to draw your attention to it and encourage you to pick it up …'.



2

But equal to all this transparency, Verwoert suggested, is *Dot Dot Dot*'s persistent attraction to the opaque; work that is distinctly obtuse, hermetic or sophisticated. Paulina Ołowska's 2001 photograph of a 'Bauhaus Yoga' performance, for example, whose accompanying text notes the shared utopian ends of both schools



6

– a text which, like this one, is a distinct component *of* the work, not just a caption subservient to it.

Or up above one of the cupboard doors next to the exit back to the hallway, the remarkably considered dust jacket for Richard Hamilton's 1992 book of writing, *Collected Words*




14

– a compendium of graphic styles, mediums, references and in-jokes, exhaustively annotated by Rob Giampietro in his own ‘Collected Words’ *for Dot Dot Dot*.

Moving through the door and into the small pink room, next to the window is Walead Beshty’s 2008 folded paper photogram overprinted with test elements from Adobe Photoshop in homage to a supposed experiment by László Moholy-Nagy that, it turns out, never existed.



17

Having pointed out this simultaneous transparency and opacity, Jan wondered both (a) how to resolve this apparent paradox, and (b) whether it’s necessary or desirable to do so. Here’s the beginning of a reversible answer, which draws heavily from his own ideas:

First, *Dot Dot Dot* is *opaque to allow access to the transparent*. I have in mind two angles on the nature of exclusivity. One is that secrecy and obliqueness are used to deny certain parties (i.e. readers and audiences) access to information (i.e. art and other cultural detritus). While this clearly seems negative, the same qualities could be considered positive if you accept that an understanding of cultural codes allows a form of initiation into a community – or rather a commitment to engage and participate with one. Perhaps this could be more simply understood as the difference between the immature and mature student. (Nothing to do with age, of course.) If so, this could only reasonably be deemed adverse if any interested party were actively refused entry to this ‘school’ by whatever metaphorical bouncer.

The rainbow text that announces the ‘Invisible University’, on the same pink room’s East wall next to the bookcase, operates on this principle.

**The Invisible University and its historical values:**

**I. U. means learning as an ecosystem**
**(what on earth might this mean?).**
**I. U. means being carbon positive.**
**I. U. all data is everywhere, all the time.**
**I. U. means architecture is no substitute for**
**face-to-face contact.**
**I. U. means a new relationship between**
**man and nature.**
**I. U. needs no new buildings.**
**I. U. means tune up kits**
**(small robots, cyber-pets and**
**neuro-gardening – see catalogue**
**available from caretaker).**
**I. U. means knowing what time it is, is more**
**important than knowing where you are.**
**I. U. uses less fuel per hour**
**than any other university.**

**I. U.**

12

Made in 2005 by John Morgan for an ongoing project founded by architect David Greene, this screenprinted announcement utilizes deliberately clipped yet expansive language to itemize a few working principles that float the idea of a school freed from institutional confines. Its rhetoric is enigmatic but not elitist – a playful set of open statements carefully designed to dislodge received wisdom and common practice.

However, *Dot Dot Dot* is equally *transparent to allow access to the opaque*. Regardless of the efficacy of distribution, location or promotion, publishing and exhibiting are – intrinsically – acts of engagement. They are foremost gestures of multiplication and connection towards the sharing of ideas. If those works transparently articulated or exhibited are *then* opaque, I'd continue to argue that each individual piece of work (text, image or object) presupposes its own balancing act between the generation and killing of curiosity via supplementary material; and a return to zero in each case.

The apparent paradox Jan is describing was understood, resolved and labelled by Michel Foucault as 'heterotopic,' a term he borrowed from biology to describe spaces, mental or physical, where contradictions can co-exist. A heterotopia is an actual place (as opposed to a utopia) that presupposes a mechanism of opening and closing, simultaneously allowing and restricting access to an environment (He originally applied the term to public spaces). And according to Foucault, the most efficient metaphor here is the cruise ship, which is not a paradox at all.

Anthony Huberman responded to a previous version of this overextended caption by arguing:

> What I thought Jan was talking about was how what is interesting, today, is the question of style, not the questions of mechanics, or self-reflexivity, or transparency, or opacity, or exclusivity, or democracy ... the 'style' with which one shares secrets ('secrets' not in the sense of a 'caper' or 'mystery' or 'trick' or 'shadow economy,' but in the very ordinary sense that 100% of all communication involves the sharing of secrets, and that there is nothing special or shadowy about that at all). Performing in a 'key' is what matters ... the 'key' is where an artist *exits* from the flat binary space of Opacity-Transparency or Black-White or Yes-No or Knowing-Not Knowing, and enters the 'infra-thin' other space, something more 3-D, in a musical sense ... the sense of crawling *inside* of Terry Riley's 'In C' and letting notes push and pull you every-which way, not map-able, not 'conceptual art', not 'the form reflects and exposes and illustrates the content', but much less name-able. 'Pleasure' is a word that comes to mind.
>
> But at the same time, this *is* what you talk about and what you do ... your images are 'irrational accompaniments that operate alongside', not as 'illustrations' ... done in such a way as to establish a *mood* in the reading experience ... and it works so well, lets that mood linger and coat the reader's experience in its nebulous way ... the 'mood' being the Good Manners you talk about.
>
> And then I think the mood gets broken every time the idea of 'meta' or 'form reflecting its content' or words like 'transparency' or 'opacity' or 'exclusivity' enter the picture ... they are not only irrelevant, but they also seem counter-productive ... they somehow act like mood-breakers ... like the kind of information that makes everything seem pragmatic, efficient, calculated, and conceptually sound ... when what the reader is enjoying is how it all seems so *inefficient*, un-sound, erratic, misbehaving, but, somehow (and this is the magic) still well-mannered and generous!
>
> But hearing how while it *seems* erratic, it's all actually a highly efficient system, a delicate and deliberate balance of transparency

> weighed with opacity, with the form being a careful illustration of its method ... well ... it's as if I was watching a light-footed and elegant dance, done in 'the key of the generous,' with interpretive doors opening and closing along the way, with different viewers slipping in and out of them, and the guy next to me leans over and tells me that the number of steps the dancer was making, actually, corresponds to the number of something clever-and-appropriate, and how, conceptually and pragmatically, it therefore forms a system that 'is' what it is 'about', and isn't that so interesting ... If the guy next to me told me that, in that moment, as I was slipping in and out of experiences, I think I would consider it a case of bad manners![40]

All of which is wholeheartedly agreed with in principle, but not in this specific instance of practice – simply because the present text, long-windedly and ungraciously falling over itself to 'explain' its subject, *is* on this occasion the style or key or mood. Which is to say, these various instalments of walls and pages – or in this case speakers – aren't really 'about' either the mute collection or the didactic caption at all. Rather, they're intended to summon the infra-thin point between the two: a talking point, or point of entry. It's quite literally a set-up, a premise to be written or spoken about. This supposed equilibrium of transparency and opacity is hardly a controlled ecosystem. Such notions are only apparent in retrospect, and even then only when trying to work out what might be going on.

As such, surely all this operates one level further removed from that basic opacity/transparency dichotomy. I too find being told what's 'meta' or 'form reflecting its content' or explicating 'transparency' or 'opacity' or 'exclusivity' fundamentally bad mannered. But the reason for not simply good-manneredly letting the objects or images speak for themselves here is precisely because here they've been stripped from their contextualizing texts and so don't have a voice to speak with. Or to follow Anthony's metaphor, they're steps with no music to dance to.

This text, an articulation of the 'reasoning' – the back-stories, criteria, connections – in as plain, direct and frankly *discomfiting* a manner as possible is, then, a form of compensation. The task is to refill those holes created by removing the objects' original contexts, only now with a different kind of substance. In the course of this forced labour, perhaps something new and instructive is made.

Now might be a good moment to move back to the hall where we began. Once again: the abiding interest here, over and above any particular discipline, medium or cause, is in simultaneously documenting and practising work about and through self-reflexivity. The closest I've come to understanding *why* is embedded in the following quote, courtesy of Albert Appel Jnr.'s annotated version of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*:

> The vertiginous conclusion of a Vladimir Nabokov novel calls for a complicated response which many readers, after a lifetime of realistic novels, are incapable of making. Children, however, are aware of other possibilities ... One afternoon my wife and I built a puppet theatre. After propping the theatre on the top edge of the living room couch, I crouched down behind it and began manipulating the two hand puppets in the stage above me. The couch and the theatre's scenery provided good cover, enabling me to peer over the edge and watch the children immediately become engrossed in the show, and then virtually mesmerized by my improvised little story that ended with a patient father spanking an impossible child. But the puppeteer, carried away by his story's violent climax, knocked over the entire theatre, which clattered onto the floor, collapsing in a heap of cardboard, wood and cloth – leaving me crouched, peeking out at the room, my head now visible over the couch's rim, my puppetted hands, with their naked

[40] Email from Anthony Huberman, April 2010.

> wrists, poised in mid-air. For several moments my children remained in their open-mouthed trance, still in the story, staring at the space where the theatre had been, not seeing me at all. Then they did the kind of double-take that a comedian might take a lifetime to perfect, and began to laugh uncontrollably, in a way I had never seen before – and not so much at my clumsiness, which was nothing new, but rather at those moments of total involvement in a non-existent world, and at what its collapse implied to them about the authenticity of the larger world, and about their daily efforts to order it and their own fabricated illusions. They were laughing, too, over their sense of what the vigorous performance had meant to me; but they saw how easily they could be tricked and their trust belied, and the shrillness of their laughter finally suggested that they recognized the frightening implications of what had happened, and that only laughter could steel them in their new awareness.[41]

I could carry on itemizing here – the recurring censor lines, the monochromes and rainbows, the reversals and mirrors – but would rather contrive to tie this up by pointing to that text reversed out of the burgundy field hung above the lavatory door on the landing. This is a screenprint stencil, conveniently hung by its frame back-to-front, of an old Esperanto motto: *Logika, Neutrala, Facila*



4

– Logical, Neutral, Easy. It was included in an early *Dot Dot Dot* alongside Paulina Ołowska's 2002 billboard campaign *Ci vu Parolas Esperanton?* (*Do you speak Esperanto?*) Back then, I naively assumed such sentiments described the magazine too, but have since slowly come to consider it far closer to the polar opposite: *Mallogika, Partia, Malsimpla*: Illogical, Biased, Complicated.

All previous incarnations of this collection have tried to find two forms of balance: the first between presenting the group as an overall image and as a set of individual ones (preferably in that order); the second between letting the objects speak for themselves and labelling them (preferably in that order). Rather than a 'hang' or 'exhibition' or 'collection' or 'print', perhaps this thing is more accurately named an 'attempt' – which happens to be the original meaning of 'essay'. This is, then, the latest attempt: a leporello-folded transcript of a voiceover that captioned the most recent hang of objects in an apartment space in Amsterdam determined by their previous reproduction as a printed sheet of images in Paris displayed in Dublin based on the previous arrangement in Munich based on a previous leporello based on a previous wall based on a previous leporello based on a previous wall, with certain pieces added or subtracted according to various circumstances met along the way …

On each occasion, the collection's arrangement can be accounted for by this ever-loosening coil of a plan; and at this point let's consider it simply, or complexly, the thirteenth provincial arrangement of a very particular graphic Esperanto.[42]

[41] Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., *The Annotated Lolita* [revised edn., 1991] (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. xxx–xxxii.

[42] At this point, the collection is clearly the work of a very large constellation. With thanks on this particular occasion to Giles Bailey (the voice), Maxine Kopsa, and Krist Gruijthuijsen, and to the various lenders of the works past and present (Justin Beal, Paul Elliman, Chris Evans, Jason Fulford, Ryan Gander, Katrine Herian, Paulina Olowska, and Stroom, Den Haag); with due regard to the original courtesies and permissions to reproduce these images in the magazine; to the contributors who originally introduced them (Justin Beal, Mark Beasley, Walead Beshty, Michael Bracewell, Gerard Byrne, Diedrich Diederichsen, Paul Elliman, Alice Fisher, Ryan Gander, Mark Geffriaud, Rob Giampietro, David Greene, Samantha Hardingham, Will Holder, Andrew Hunt, Louis Kaplan, Alex Klein, Kim Levine, Louis Lüthi, Eugene Menard, John Morgan,

The single anomaly to the collection's oscillating exhibition/essay format was *DDDG: Extended Caption*, a large-format book assembled from scans of pages ripped from all those *Dot Dot Dot* articles the artefacts had originally illustrated.[43] The project had evidently come full-circle: from print to wall to print again. It was published on the occasion of the collection's installation at Culturgest Porto, Portugal (2009), with the idea that it comprised half the show.






The situation was, however, entirely unreasonable in that it was patently impossible to absorb anything more than a fraction of this supposed 'caption'. Conversely, without any umbilical link to these founding texts, any onlooker would likely miss nine-tenths of what made the stuff worth illustrating in the first place. In a public conversation with Jan Verwoert spent discussing the book in front of the wall, we concluded that our talking about all the above before an audience ought not be conceived as merely a supplement to the project, but instead its very essence – as 'publishing' in its most expansive

Neil Mulholland, Paulina Olowska, David Osbaldeston, Mark Owens, Emily Pethick, Radim Peško, Seth Price, David Reinfurt, Steve Rushton, David Senior, Mark E. Smith, Sytze Steenstra, Jan Verwoert, Jon Wilde, and Christopher Wilson); and to Jerome O. Drisceoil, Aurélien Froment, John Lovett, Pablo LaFuente, Stefan Kálmar, Daniel Pies, Julia Maier, Régis Tosetti, Scott King, Roger Willems, Sam de Groot, Mário Valente Almeida, Susana Sameiro, Jan Verwoert, Isla Leaver-Yap, Emily Pethick, the Werkplaats Typografie, Kristjan Mändmaa, Christophe Lemaitre, and Frances Stark.

[43] Stuart Bailey, ed., *Extended Caption* (Amsterdam: ROMA, 2009).

sense: making things public. The manifold public articulations of this batch of artefacts aren't ends in themselves, but generators, catalysts: precisely, forms as ways of thinking.

Verwoert had also written *Extended Caption*'s only new text – some emerging thoughts that I compressed into a small blurb for its back cover:

Modernism never really failed, it just became hermetic. To initiate oneself into the experience that avant-garde works offer takes time, and initiating oneself is a labour of love.

Here's the problem: given that the creation of a revolutionary artistic language designed to appeal to – and change the minds of – anyone anywhere was the stated objective of many an avant-gardist's attempt to radicalize the project of enlightenment, the crude fact that the world didn't listen would seem to imply total failure. This might be true if we judge those avant-gardists by their intentions and success, but is it not rather their ideas and work that concern us?

In which case, the question becomes: how can we address – engage with, speak about and do justice to – work that originally intended to talk straight, but now, hermetically, only speaks in code? We have to know how to decipher the code, and, at the same time, talk straight enough to allow others to share the secret.

The continued insistence on sharing the secret of avant-gardism is vital, not least because keeping the secret safe only confirms the status quo. It's what all conformists do: competitive academics and market players alike avidly protect their secret, i.e. the exclusive rarefied knowledge (of what is 'true' and 'good' and what is not) they supposedly already possess. They must, as it is their capital and the foundation of their power position. On the other hand, struggling to share what remains difficult to share – the experience that underlies all good avant-garde work – means to squander that capital, irreverently, through art, pedagogy and publishing. There is a madness to the insistence on speaking about hermetic things. But it is precisely through this mad anticapitalist stance of insistently sharing secrets (rather than banking them) that such an irreverent artistic, pedagogical and publishing practice puts its avant-garde inheritance to use: the mad belief that the secret of something good could be shared with anyone willing to experience it.

So, if modernism never really failed and just became hermetic, the labour of love of initiating oneself and others into its experience involves sharing the secret of something good by speaking in code while talking straight, i.e. in a language that might at first seem completely unhinged.

## 2.4: ON TO THE SERVING LIBRARY

In the closing stages of assembling *Dot Dot Dot* #20, I came across three instructive examples of reflexive reinvention. The first was in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière's 1981 biography-tract of Joseph Jacotot, a 19th-century revolutionary pedagog who propounded a 'horizontal' egalitarian alternative to 'vertical' patriarchal forms of learning. Upon realizing that the principles of what he called 'Universal Teaching' had become institutionalized and, consequently, debased beyond recognition, Jacotot dissociated himself from what his ideas had become by adopting a new term, 'Panecastic', which etymologically means much the same thing.

Similarly, in 1936 Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht discarded his coining 'Epic Theatre' in favour of 'Dialectical Theatre' once it 'had become too formal a concept to be of use anymore'. And again, after co-founding the multi-disciplinary Tropicalia movement in the late 1960s, then witnessing its rapid assimilation and dilution, Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica denounced the name and declared he would henceforth work under the new banner of 'The Suprasensorial'. In all three cases, an idea is superficially disowned yet essentially perpetuated thanks to a simple linguistic switch, a safeguard against domestication or commodification.

So far in this account of the last *Dot Dot Dot*, I've avoided mentioning the fact that amid all the surrogate editorials there was a perfectly straightforward one, too. 'Final Words', the last piece in the

issue, is more or less an abbreviated version of the story I've just finished telling here, which ends on the following thought:

A conversation with my better half about some of the things I was grappling with here ended with her telling me to stop saying 'we' when I really meant 'I', or at least make it clear who that 'we' actually thinks it speaks for. For me, though, editing *Dot Dot Dot* was increasingly defined by the luxury of asking others to articulate things that I suspect I'll be interested in – to be able to assemble a brain with more capacity and capability than my own. (In fact, I suspect that 'articulating things I suspect I'm interested in' is the reason I was drawn to graphic design in the first place.) So yes, I had often used a vaguely royal 'we' to refer variously and indiscriminately to myself in the singular, myself plus one of two close collaborators, the wider pool of *Dot Dot Dot*'s contributors, and probably sometimes even to its collective readership. But usually the pseudo-plural is simply the most accurate way of alluding to this larger cephalopodic mind – one that not only performs how with greater efficiency and speed, but also (unlike computers and other common prosthetics) contributes to the collective why too. This is the sense in which I mean we.

The abstruse reference to cephalopods in the penultimate line alludes to an essay by Angie Keefer (soon to become the third co-founder of The Serving Library alongside David and myself) called 'An Octopus in Plan View'. Edited by Dexter Sinister together with artist Shannon Ebner in response to a Frieze commission in late 2010, it was initially produced as an audio piece, recorded in a makeshift cabin at the art fair in Regents Park, London, to be played to a dedicated audience in an office halfway up the Chrysler Building in New York. A revised, illustrated version of the essay ended up as the large heart of what was effectively the 21st *Dot Dot Dot*, but actually published as the inaugural number of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*.

The emerging idea was to continue the journal under this new name, effectively introducing itself as the house journal of a nascent non-profit institution called The Serving Library. After five years of responding reflexively but a little arbitrarily to unexpected invitations under the name Dexter Sinister, it seemed time to 'superficially disown yet essentially perpetuate' our gathering interests in line with a more considered, longer term plan – consonant with the drive to set up a more socially answerable project that propelled the last *Dot Dot Dot*, only now applied to a nascent institution rather than an established journal.[44]

The octopus text started life as part of a whole other essay by Angie, eventually titled 'Duck-Rabbit etc.' and included in *Dot Dot Dot* #20. It is concerned, like 'Final Words', the extent to which language can or can't reflect the 'truth' of a situation. An early draft of 'Duck-Rabbit etc.' included a passage about how certain physical attributes of the *octopus vulgaris* anticipate the notion of 'post-symbolic communication' among humans, most succinctly explained by way of the octopus's eye.

An octopus eye has the same basic structure as a human one, only the latter has evolved to the point of becoming folded back upon itself (inexplicably, in orthodox engineering terms). As such, there's a gap between information – in the form of light – being received on the surface of the eye, and its subsequent transmittal to the brain. This means that, in a human eye, light waves need to be *translated* into neurological activity. An octopus's eye, meanwhile, is *not* folded back upon itself; eye and brain comprise a single organ, therefore there's no gap in transmission, and so no translation necessary. As such, communication by and among such cephalopods is, in theory at least, immediate, and this is thought to relate to other remarkable (and metaphorically rich) faculties of the *octopus vulgaris*, such as the ability to shape-shift, or to produce a decoy of itself in ink.

In the end, this passage proved too long and distracting from the main thrust of 'Duck-Rabbit etc.' so we duly removed it with the idea of turning it into an essay in its own right. The result has eight parts, or 'feelers', each of which relates one aspect of the subject, from the etymological roots of the word 'octopus' (which sets up the notion of the changing, flexible nature of language), through various

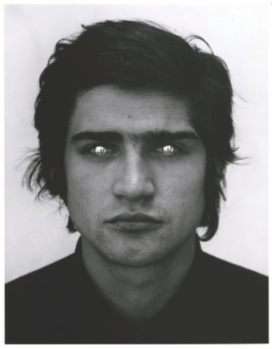
[44] See the small-print 'Article of Incorporation' at the back of each printed issue of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, reproduced here in the Appendix. This is a summary of the Library's component parts, written three ways to serve different purposes: compressed, casual, and corporate. See also: http://www.servinglibrary.org/about.

allusive physical characteristics (the eyeball, camouflage, sex organs), to those qualities that allude to 20th-century media concepts including Information Theory and Virtual Reality. Together, the eight chapters float the idea – and ideally the sensation – of what it might mean for human communication to evolve beyond symbol-based language. This was inadvertently emphasized by the communal listening event in the Chrysler Building: a roomful of people focused on this unusually *involved* text, and so presumably more or less thinking about the same thing at the same time in the same space. It sounds strange or exaggerated, but there was a strong sense in the room that everyone there could *feel* the implications of this communal listening relative to the subject matter, even if no one could articulate it exactly.

There are two particular implications of Angie's essay that explain the presence of the cephalopod in that final paragraph of the final words of the final issue of *Dot Dot Dot*, and worth emphasizing in pointed anticipation of the rest of this thesis. First, that the body of this extraordinary animal – its surface, its style – *is* its language, i.e. what's seen is what's meant; thought and expression are a single procedure, a *gestalt*. The second is that the so-called 'baffle patterns' on the animal's skin are, like all good non-sequiturs, apparently purposefully designed to disorient its audience, i.e. hostile predators; hence the analogy with Virtual Reality, which, by similar means of disorientation, is thought by some to be a means of expanding our sense of possibility, changing our ways of thinking, and so too our ways of changing.

By this point it should be clear that all these pieces recounted from the last *Dot Dot Dot* are, like the journal generally, emphatically palimpsest in nature – intended from the outset to be overwritten, reconfigured, extended and dispersed in new forms and formats. In the 'P for Professor' section of the testimonial TV interview *L'Abécédaire* (1988–9),[45] Gilles Deleuze stated that his main aim as a philosopher and teacher was always *to introduce concepts,* not in view of establishing them (and so forging a 'school of thought') but in order that they might circulate freely in others' discourse, applied and manipulated in unforeseeable ways, in perpetual movement and so ideally *taken further*. The various tentacles of *Dot Dot Dot* reach out in the same spirit – as lures, prompts, excuses for ideas and interests to be pushed and pulled, elaborated and refined by the people and conditions met along the way.

*Dot Dot Dot* #20 seemingly moved from the intention to 'be direct' towards what might appear to be the opposite – an apex of solipsistic self-reflexivity, reflecting inwardly on itself rather than the world at large, not unlike Giuseppe Penone's self-portrait with mirrored contact lenses, *To Reverse One's Eyes* (1970), which was one of several emblematic images included in the issue.



And yet this about-face *did* nevertheless yield its own moment of recursive clarity: that '*directness can be achieved only indirectly,* which is to say by glancing, bouncing, and *refusing to accept the paralysis that this contradiction suggests*.' Otherwise put, considered from a higher vantage, a point of disinterest, paradox turns resolution.

This 'refusal to accept the paralysis' recalls Umberto Eco's self-help against alienation in *The Open Work*: meet the dialectic head-on and stay mindful of its contradiction. The root-level situation doesn't

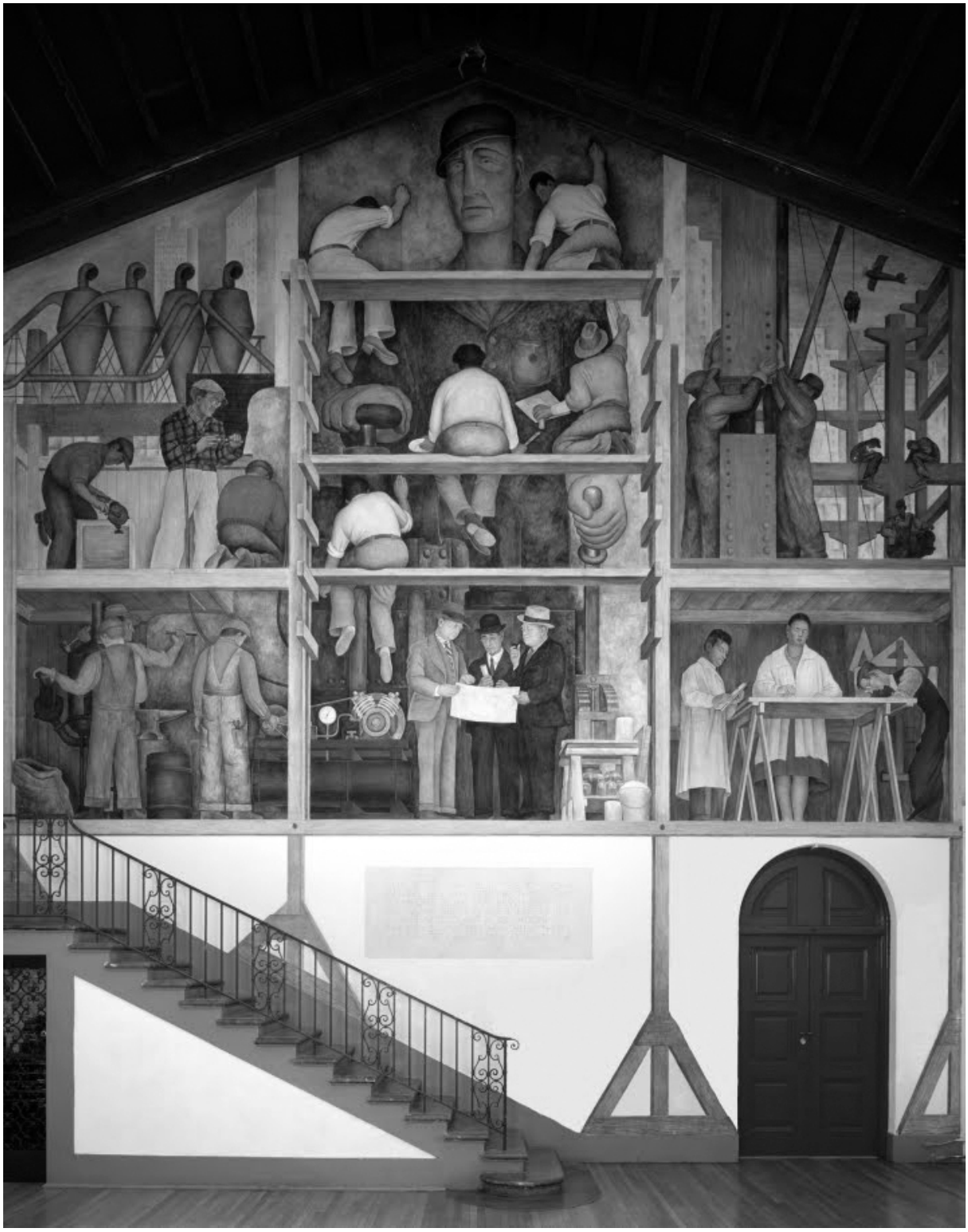
[45] On DVD with English subtitles: *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

change, but your practical perception of it does – from a negatively deluded resignation to a positively cognizant outlook.

The fundamental drive behind *Dot Dot Dot* generally, and this last issue in particular, was always to work out what it is by doing it. One of those things it ended up being is a response to the research question that this thesis originally set out to answer:

*How is Umberto Eco's maxim 'form must be a way of thinking' articulated, elaborated and performed today at the overlap of art, design and typography?*

By essaying an account that generates another question, or set of questions, more fundamental than the last.



Diego Rivera, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* (1931), wall mural, San Francisco Art Institute

# 3: SELF-REFLEXIVITY AS A MODEL

The image on the preceding page shows Diego Rivera's *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, a mural painted in 1931 on an entire wall at one end of a gallery at the San Francisco Art Institute. It's a *trompe l'oeil* with an extremely shallow perspective that depicts two distinct layers. Furthest from the viewer is an 'inner' mural with scenes of industrial urbanism, while the closer 'outer' one shows a scaffold that supports the various people contracted to produce it. These are *actual* portraits of those involved in making the work, including Rivera himself perched just above the centre, buttocks overhanging a plank as he contemplates the first layer. The surrounding cast includes a few assistants, architects, technicians, civil servants, and the philanthropist who commissioned the piece. All in all, Rivera's mural is an example of an emphatically self-reflexive artwork.

Now, I want to begin by distinguishing *working self-reflexively* (a process, an adverb) from *self-reflexive work* (a product, a noun), and assert that one doesn't automatically imply the other. That's to say, work that comes across as markedly 'self-reflexive' needn't have been made self-reflexively; and conversely, working self-reflexively doesn't necessarily yield work that comes across as markedly 'self-reflexive'. (The quote marks say it all, of course.) This is pedantic, but I mean only to stress that what's important is that work *moves*, not that it moves *back on itself*. My aim in this chapter is not to promote self-reflexive work per se, but to suggest how it can usefully *model* the movement we're after when forming is a way of thinking.

I start by getting to grips with the term via a compilation of fundamental 'Species of self-reflexivity'. This is followed by a rapid dialogue, 'At the time of writing', assembled for a book that's equally invested in the subject. 'Self-reflexivity in contemporary art' is self-explanatory; in 'Modernism as a constant habit' I hone in on how contemporary art's essential self-awareness and self-criticality have been (and still can be) put to constructive use; then dwell on its 'two-fold' nature in 'Extra-conscious'.

'Cynical limits' worries over how the strategic application of self-reflexivity typically turns tired, ironic, and ultimately useless. In 'Trope versus Temperament', I counterpose this with a positively transparent, earnest disposition, first with reference to the work of late American author David Foster Wallace; then in view of British artist Ryan Gander – a 'Duplicitous example'. 'Communicating communicability' notes Giorgio Agamben's use of a related term, 'mediality'; and this leads into my not quite concluding with some broad thoughts on the limits of self-consciousness: 'Incomplete'.

## 3.1: SPECIES OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY

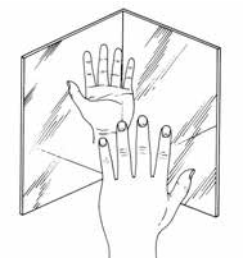
In the broadest sense, 'self-reflexive' refers to something that refers to itself. Both 'self-re*flec*tive' and the unqualified 'reflexive' have been used to mean much the same thing. To my ears, though, 'reflective', with or without the prefix, has *ponderous* overtones that are largely superfluous to my concerns ('noticing the hammer, she reflected'), while 'reflexive' insinuates something *voluntary* as derived from 'reflex' ('his knee jerked reflexively'). 'Self-reflexive' is anyway more frequently used in the realm of aesthetics than, say, psychology or physiology, so I'm sticking with this catch-all term.

That said, there *is* a further discipline-specific inflection of the lone 'reflexive' worth noting. In social theory it describes a process of cause and effect in which the act of reflecting directly affects an outcome – that is, when the observations or actions of observers in the social system affect the situation under observation.[1] Reflexivity thus conceived is not an end in itself, but part of a cybernetic process, a self-adjusting mechanism. The presence of an anthropologist at work in an isolated village may, for instance, affect the behaviour of its citizens he or she is studying; or an individual's response to a sociological survey may be influenced by the fact of having been asked to respond in the first place.

[1] This same kind of unsurmountable paradox is known in physics as the 'observer effect', more or less commensurate with Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle in quantum physics (see fn. 9 below). See also the notes on Set Theory later in §3.11.

Inasmuch as it undermines claims to objectivity, sociological 'reflexivity' clearly has negative connotations. It points to the fallacy – or at least the limits – of a supposedly 'pure' poll. An *affirmative* instance of reflexive cause and effect, however, can be seen in what's known as a 'True Mirror'. In a regular mirror we're accustomed to seeing our own image inverted on a horizontal axis (unlike a photograph, in which we see ourselves as others do). This is so habitual that we don't notice the inversion, and are therefore *relatively unaffected by the reflection*. A True Mirror, though, is constructed from two regular mirrors positioned set facing each other at 45 degrees, so each one reflects the *other*'s reflection back at the viewer. These two angled mirrors are then boxed in a deep 12-inch square frame, and fronted by a pane of non-reflective glass that flattens the whole construction and gives the illusion of a direct reflection. Stood directly in front of the box, you now see yourself as others do – the 'right way round'.

However, because we're used to seeing the same inverted reflection in regular mirrors all our lives, we become accustomed to the inevitable asymmetry of our own face by mentally compensating for its irregularities; and so most of us don't think of ourselves as looking particularly asymmetrical. Devoid of this habitual illusion, a True Mirror suddenly reveals such disturbing discrepancies which (trust me) only become increasingly pronounced the more an alarmed onlooker struggles to re-adjust their features in front of an image that suddenly won't behave. The common – reflex – reaction is to alter one's expression in a vain attempt to correct or compensate for the shock of seeing the new 'true' self. Because right and left brain are out of whack, as you try to move to the right, your reflection moves – *correctly* – to *its* right; and so you find yourself stuck in a loop of broken cause and effect. Watch someone else looking into a True Mirror and you'll see someone miserably struggling to readjust to this new and disturbing 'truth'.



As it happens, the cybernetic notion of feedback is classified either 'positive' or 'negative'. Positive feedback is a self-*generating* mechanism without checks or limits that effects increasing entropy or chaos over time, while negative feedback describes the regulated result of a system maintained by some kind of self-*checking* device. In a semantic slip, then, the essentially *progressive* effect of such as a True Mirror is classified 'negative' in cybernetic terms.

All of which is a circuitous way of beginning this chapter by acknowledging first that (self-)criticism *ideally* works in the direction of (self-)improvement; then that Lars Bang Larsen recently pointed out that as well as being self-*generative* or 'autopoietic', feedback is also self-*manifesting*: 'Because it is self-generative, feedback is considered an organism which carries or *embodies* a message.'[2]

So: at the very least we can say that self-reflexivity embodies the critical spirit – and at most that it perhaps fosters it too. How does this play out specifically in the arts?

My own formative experience of self-reflexive art was courtesy of *Grimble*, a singularly flippant children's book by Clement Freud from the late 1960s about an eponymous ten-year-old with outrageously bohemian parents. Towards the end of the story, Grimble goes 'into a stationer's shop and

[2] Lars Bang Larsen, 'NNNNNNWAHHHHH!', *Bulletins of the Serving Library* #4 (2012), p. 13. Larsen is here paraphrasing the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener. The idea is commensurate with Luigi Pareyson's definition of art as 'form', synonymous with 'organism': 'formed physicality with a life of its own ... governed by its own laws.' (Eco, op. cit., p. 158.) See also §1.4.

there were some good red stick-on arrows that cost 19p, and as this left exactly 50p and the shop sold a book called GRIMBLE by Clement Freud for 25p, he bought two.'[3]

All forms of self-reflexive art involve some such demonstration of meta-awareness; that is, of being aware of being aware. The intention is generally to rupture the illusion of a work's self-containment, most obviously its fictional conceit (visually in the Rivera mural, verbally in *Grimble*), in order to dismantle the implied boundary between the work and the world. This is famously known as 'breaking the fourth wall', a phrase commonly associated with Brecht's Epic Theatre. It alludes to the imaginary wall that typically separates an audience from the actors, as if it has been removed to reveal 'real life'. Brecht presented the conceit of a 'play' as plainly as possible, abandoning those structural conventions designed to lull an audience into perceiving some parallel fictional world (as noted in §1.4): the lights were left on, smoking was permitted, and actors read their parts flatly to avoid the conceit of 'getting into character'; all of which amounted to the so-called *verfremdungseffekt* (variously translated as 'alienation', 'distancing', 'defamiliarization' or 'estrangement' effect). The normal format is 'made strange': counter to the typically detached, passive experience of art, the work is emphatically *involved* and its audience actively implicated in its themes – in Brecht's case frankly dialectical, Marxist ones.

The 'offset' aspect of self-reflexive work – the structural revelation – doesn't always involve rupturing a fictional world to reveal the real one. It can equally occur *within* a work by recourse to some equivalent form of meta-reference. An obvious example is the knowing aside, i.e. when a character comes out of character to directly address either an actual live audience, or a nominal one beyond the implied boundaries of a fictional scenario (whether camera frame, theatre stage, or written narrative). The device is by no means new, equally native to Shakespeare, Woody Allen, the cartoonist who draws his own hand to rub out Daffy Duck, or the singer who shouts 'chorus!' as a lead-in to the chorus.

By drawing attention to the seam between the work and the world, the artist sets up an apprehension of levels: an enveloping effect; and in acknowledging the simultaneity of these levels, the payoff for both artist and audience is a kind of perceptive frisson.



One of the earliest and most familiar emblems of self-reflexivity is the *mise en abyme* (literally, to place 'at centre' or 'into infinity'), a heraldic term that describes a coat of arms inscribed with a smaller version of itself. The artistic application of the idea was chronicled in French literary critic Lucian Dällenbach's *The Mirror in the Text*, particularly in view of its implications for the then-contemporary *noveau roman*.[4] Dällenbach taps a rich vein of literature since André Gide, who first used the term as a general aesthetic descriptor, and draws in a few prescient instances from painting (Van Eyck, Velásquez). Extrapolating from Gide, Dällenbach defines *mise en abyme* as 'any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it.'[5]

[3] Clement Freud, *Grimble* [1968] (Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1974), pp. 117–8.

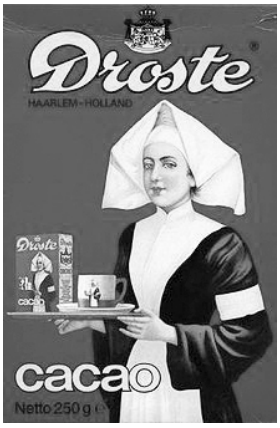
[4] Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text* [1977] (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

[5] Ibid., p. 8.



A classic early example is *Las Meninas* (1656), in which Velásquez depicts himself painting the painting, as though the border of the canvas coincides with a mirror within the scene. Gide was the first, too, to attempt to grasp the poetics of such involution, writing that the subject of such work *is transposed at the level of the characters*: 'Nothing sheds more light on the work or displays the proportions of the whole work more accurately.' Otherwise put, this self-mirroring device – the whole duplicated in miniature – is offered as a *key* to reading the work, potentially in terms of both structure and subject matter.

Whatever the variety of involution,[6] the phrase '*mise en abyme*' always implies (as its most familiar iteration as image clearly shows) that its recursion *potentially* continues infinitely and abyss-mally in either direction, in or out. The term is now commonly used to refer to any such text or image whose form is fundamentally recursive, the familiar nesting logic of the *Matryoshka* or Russian Doll. There are endless variations on this theme, such as the graphic *Droste Effect*, named after a brand of Dutch cocoa whose packaging flatly depicts the same sort of embedding effect set off by a body between two parallel mirrors.






Literary equivalents include the story-within-a-story, such as Scheherazade's narrative deferrals in the *Arabian Nights*; the perpetually branching narrative of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*; or the conceit of an author writing himself, the reader, or some other realworld character into a fictional narrative, as in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* and Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*. The same self-similarity is found in fractal geometry. Whatever the field, and whether manifest as text or image, the effect is essentially vertiginous, consonant with Kierkegaard's

[6] Dällenbach's book traverses a detailed typology, and it's worth noting his three-part definition of the *mise en abyme*'s formal conceit ('any internal mirror that reflects on the whole of its narrative'): a. Simple: a single duplication of a work inside itself; b. Infinite: the same thing, only repeated indefinitely; and c. Aporetic: in which the 'enclosed' work itself encloses the 'outer' one, and is therefore structurally paradoxical or specious in the manner of an Escher illusion.

description of anxiety as ‘the dizziness of freedom’ or ‘freedom’s actuality, the possibility of possibility’.[7]

Alongside the collapsed fourth wall and the *mise en abyme*, a third species of self-reflexive meta-awareness consists in the sort of ‘intertextual’ work that references other art. An immediate example is anything by the very contemporary Jonathan Monk, who typically references earlier originals like John Baldessari’s *Baldessari Sings LeWitt,* which had already seemed to simultaneously assert and mock Sol LeWitt’s paradigmatic *Sentences on Conceptual Art* back when both were made in 1969. A more recent and unsettling example is Mark Leckey’s *Made in ’Eaven* (2004), a CGI rendering of Jeff Koons’s silver rabbit impossibly transposed to Leckey’s apartment in London, spookily devoid of the usual reflection of the photographic lens or viewer’s own image on its animated chrome surface.

The obligatory example from literature is Jorge Luis Borges’s metafictional gem ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’ (1939), the protagonist of which rewrites parts of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* word for word. This kind of arch interplay has been further referred to in terms of a *fifth* wall, projecting from a yet farther remove from reality. When the fifth wall is broken, a character within one fictional world refers to a previous character in a totally unrelated second one. This next-next-level consciousness aligns with the proto-Dadaist Alfred Jarry’s concept of the ’pataphor as ‘a metaphor extended into a virtual space entirely of its own’.[8] In one notorious instance from TV, *Star Trek*’s Captain Kirk, William Shatner, plays another role in an entirely unrelated series, the plot of which involves a ‘theoretically’ impossible (or at least nonsensical) meta-allusion to his Kirk character.

Of the three broad species of self-reflexivity inventorized above – breaking the fourth wall, assembling a *mise en abyme*, introducing the intertextual (they are by no means mutually exclusive) – I’m most concerned with the first, i.e. with work that’s more or less concerned with showing its own workings, the recipe as well as the cake. And I’m particularly interested in those instances where there’s no clear distinction between the two, because the process can be a telling topic too.

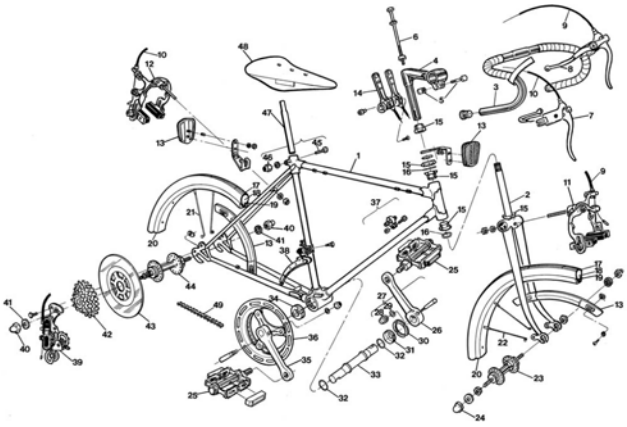
Perhaps the clearest instance of the particular denomination of self-reflexivity I’m interested in here is William Greaves’s 1968 film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* – a experimental documentary that documents its own making. Reportedly, Greaves’s idea was to apply Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle[9] to the microcosmos of a film production: a group of actors are assembled to audition for a fictional movie, and three separate film crews each instructed to film a different aspect of the proceedings. All involved slowly come to understand that the eventual film will consist solely of this ‘incidental’ footage (i.e. that there is no ‘other’ film), and Greaves simply allows this knowledge to seep in while recording its psychological knock-on effects. In one typical scene, the cast and crew assemble to discuss – and record themselves discussing – what they think of the director’s conceit, what his motivations might be, and so on. On the fault line of that sociological sense of ‘reflexivity’ mentioned at the start of this section, the film is a study of how the awareness of a given situation affects that situation; but it’s also the story of the changing relations among this particular cast, crew, and a director who remains productively inscrutable throughout.

[7] Josipovici, op. cit., p. 44.

[8] ‘Just as ’pataphysics extends metaphysics into the realm of the imaginary,’pataphors extend metaphors into a virtual space entirely their own. So if there is thunder (fact) and that thunder is like a bolt thrown by an angry god (metaphor) then that god’s whole world, his interactions with other gods, the power he draws from his celestial position, his bolt-throwing abilities – all of that persists on the level of the ’pataphysical – a networked set of metaphors with minds of their own and implications for the world of the real.’ From: Rob Giampietro, ‘I am a Handle’, *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #2, 2011, p. 128.

[9] In quantum physics, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle is a means of quantifying the degree of unpredictability in the way particles react as a consequence of the act of observing them. Greaves took the related term ‘symbiotaxiplasm’ from social theorist Arthur F. Bentley’s 1954 book *Inquiry into Inquiries*. In Greaves’s own words, the term refers to ‘those events that transpire in the course of anyone's life that have an impact on the consciousness and the psyche of the average human being, and how that human being also controls or effects changes or has an impact on the environment.’ Greaves added the ‘psycho’ in order to stress the film’s focus on the crew’s mental vicissitudes. See: http://fastcheapmoviethoughts.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/william-greaves-and-steven-soderbergh.html.

*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is the most exemplary of all the examples here inasmuch as its self-reflexivity is more a generator than a gesture; that's to say, I'm less invested in contriving vertiginous fictions in view of aesthetic effects, and more in setting up situations that productively fold the observation of that situation into its outcome – an assertively conscious means of getting things done. Those devices I consider more the *emblems* of self-reflexivity (all the *mises en abymes* and intertextual references) certainly crop up now and then in *allusion* to such practical ends; but a more apt image of this *industrious* self-reflexivity is the sort of exploded diagram where the parts of some kind of machine or mechanism are just as apparent as the simultaneous whole.



## 3.2: AT THE TIME OF WRITING

What follows is an email conversation between myself (S) and the other half of Dexter Sinister, David Reinfurt (D). It was written in order to think through how we might contribute to a book, *From Berkeley to Berkeley*.[10] The book comprises a set of conversations between all the artists who'd exhibited at Antwerp gallery Objectif during the three-year tenure of director Mai Abu ElDahab, and an equal number of judiciously chosen interlocutors. We had promised to contribute some sort of aberrant glossary, index or other such structural device, but (as the transcript tells) ended up offering this working dialogue instead. 'Will' is the book's designer, Will Holder; 'Eden' is David's then-six-year-old daughter. Explanations of other references follow where necessary.

S: I understand that at some point in the past year you'd agreed on our behalf to make a glossary or index or at least *some* kind of supplementary machine-part for the Objectif book. What were you thinking?

D: Having just read first Will and Mai's conversation and then skimmed the rest – and having received e-mails from Mai saying that she has no precise recollection what we'd agreed the glossary/index idea should be either – I now think that (a) an index is more appropriate than a glossary; and (b) Bishop Berkeley + 'To be is to be perceived' = the key.[11]

Seeing as most things I've been thinking about in the last weeks revolve around John Smith's short film *The Girl Chewing Gum*, combined with the last seven days' bedtime reading *Through the Looking Glass* with Eden, I started thinking that the best possible thing would be a 'reverse index', which is to say an index that's wrapped back into the text the first time you read it. The indexical chain is snapped

[10] Mai Abu ElDahab, ed., *From Berkeley to Berkeley: Objectif Exhibitions, 2008–2010*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

[11] An allusion to the Anglo-Irish Idealist philosopher Bishop George Berkeley, twice named in the title *From Berkeley to Berkeley* (which highlights both the looping logic of dialogue, and dialectical sense-making generally), with particular reference to his best-known maxim *Esse est precipi* ('To be seen is to be perceived'). This flags the idea that the conversations that make up the book don't merely 'represent' or 'document' the gallery's past activities, but actively *constitute* one of them in the present. As Will Holder puts it in an introductory exchange: 'initially titled *X talks to Y*, these interviews weren't necessarily conversational productions, but manifestations of an artist's practice representing itself through the addition of a secondary voice.' Ibid., p. 9.

and instead of being a pointer backwards to an original it becomes just the thing itself. Or maybe better said, it is both things at the same time and one does not cause the other. This chimes with something that Michael Stevenson says in the book about loosening up causality:

> In this case, the stories themselves point to something underpinning narrative, something you could call causality. This often limits the way we see events unfold which is at odds with retrospectively viewing history, and part of this uncomfortable relationship is our propensity to inductively reason. Being caught by the turn of events is this universal experience and a fascinating aspect of our thinking and, somehow, it is based on how we perceive things to have behaved in the past ... The model narrative we cultivate in our heads concerning the event in question comes unstuck; the model narrative is broken, and this seemingly inherent aspect of our thinking is in itself actually one of the most compelling narratives.
>
> [The Polish reporter Ryszard] Kapusinski describes in great detail the unstable moment shortly before revolution, coup, and regime change ... a moment he had experienced many times. He describes the situation whereby nothing of what has happened is useful in understanding what is and what will potentially happen.[12]

This made me wonder how a reverse index might manifest itself. In *Through the Looking Glass*, there are wonderful bits set in parentheses in which the narrator describes how Alice described what just happened to someone else after the fact. My simple idea for the Objectif book is that I run the Ordered-Reading-Gleaner script I made long ago that counts word frequency, then take maybe the top five or ten results and have these words very slightly typographically distinguished where they appear in the actual text itself. I suppose that they could be set in a different typeface, or slightly emboldened versions of the book's two typographic voices – or however else Will might want to deal with this slight imposition. Actually, I can think of a typographic signal that would lift these from the text to an appropriate degree: they could look like *this*?

S: Hmn, I think this is *okay,* but also have reservations. Is this idea really doing what it thinks it's doing? That's not a rhetorical question. Let's see … you're talking about a Reverse Index in the sense that you haven't actually compiled it yet … so in effect the reader would perceive the act of taking inventory in advance of that inventory being shelved elsewhere … as if the algorithm were caught in the act. That's piecemeal lexical engineering, of course, and having read the footnote in the introduction I see why it's apt,[13] but I think it's the *in effect* and the *as if* that are bothering me. In other words, that it's such a *representation* of that idea rather than an *actualisation* of it. It seems a bit clunky – hoary? – to capture something that would actually happen imminent-immanent-immediately in the digital aether *like this* in print. Not to mention the fact that I'm presuming it would require some essentially fraudulent reverse-engineering to make sure those Top Ten words weren't a mundane collection of ifs, buts, and thens – to limit the lassoo to capturing large nouns, say.

This is one of the main seams that runs through the book – setting up the circumstances for complex actualizations rather than simplistic representations to occur. Sure, they result in drawings, films, performances, and this book-in-progress, but these all seem distinctly – and here I mean more

[12] Michael Stevenson and Esperanza Rosales, 'Telling Stories', ibid., p. 136.

[13] From Holder's footnote again: '"Piecemeal social engineering" is a term introduced by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, with the view that a society is equivalent to the sum of its members, that the actions of the members of society serve to fashion and to shape it, and that the social consequences of intentional actions are very often, and very largely, unintentional. Popper advocated what he terms "piecemeal social engineering" as the central mechanism for social planning – for in utilizing this mechanism intentional actions are directed to the achievement of one specific goal at a time, which makes it possible to monitor the situation to determine whether adverse unintended effects of intentional actions occur, in order to correct and readjust when this proves necessary. This parallels the critical testing of theories in scientific investigation (…).' Ibid., pp. 8–10.

insistently than a lot of art – *deposited* rather than, say, sculpted. Does that make sense? The actualisation is foregrounded, the representation back-grounded, the usual figure/ground relation inverted. This isn't quite the same as saying that the structure is the substance or the medium is the message. 'The condition is the catalyst' – perhaps.

In short, I think the spirit of your index idea is right, but not the side effect. On the other hand, I'm not at all sure what I have in mind is right either. It's basically the same thing but even more clunky – although its clunkiness would now be part of the point, i.e. resolutely human. Basically, we'd follow the same dia-logic as the rest of the Objectif book and contrive a conversation. In it, we'd discuss the idea, and in the process of doing so perhaps index the book from memory. I can already recall a lot of telling recurrences – *recursion* being one of them. What else? Off the top of my head, maybe

*domestic*
*diagram*
*engineer*
*Chaplin*
*structures*

Even more than such equivalences across conversations (and exhibitions), I was struck by the similarity of the various voices at play. I don't know whether that was by design – maybe the whole was very deliberately edited into an aggregate – but I did have the sense that Mai had assembled a *very* particular collective sensibility, all tuned to the same kind of humour, temperament and concerns.
I suppose this is hardly surprising, but interesting in light of her candid remarks during the introductory conversation with Will about how the program was actually quite narrowly directed (contrary to Will's model of the radio DJ who projects into the void, to everyone potentially and no one in particular).
In other words: Objectif was actually quite Subjectif!

D: But what form would this idea take? I somehow think it should read as if it *were* mechanical, and then we just assemble an index from our brains post-reading, no? Practically that seems like a nightmare, whereas scripting it would be more a slight tremor.

S: Yeah, the decision here is basically who does the indexing – man or machine, librarian or mainframe? Perhaps we ought to tinker *this* text into the idea for an index or glossary. We can then excuse ourselves from actually having to run the script, and instead just run the notion through the minds of anyone about to read the book. To this end, perhaps it'd be better at the start of the book. Didn't Will mention that he's intending to bind the book in order that it doubles back on itself anyway, in order that the end is already at the beginning?

D: The main drawback I see in this is that the focus then falls so squarely on Us. It still seems to me slightly better to have a machine watching over us – the automation might yet save the whole exercise from feeling unnecessarily laboured, or at least align the amount of actual effort with the payoff.

S: Agreed, but then I think it's just a case of refocusing on whatever other objective purpose this pseudo-index might serve. I can imagine it doubling as a kind of blurb – that you glean the book's common denominators in advance of reading it; or equally, a neat summary of them afterwards. Academics, of course, famously head straight for the footnotes and references before the main body in order to gauge a book's plausibility. I can imagine some sort of second-hand utility along those lines.

Will and I were talking recently about thought being a looping process – that we think the same things over and over on repeat (as represented by the self-swallowing *serpent*, the Ouroboros, also alluded to more than once in the book), broken only by the aesthetic gesture that formalizes that thinking at any given point. A spanner is thrown in the works, those works are cast in metaphorical plaster, and – here's the important part – consideration of those casts sets new loops in motion. I wonder whether you think there's a particular value in perceiving art in this way?

I also wonder how this might relate back to *The Girl Chewing Gum*. I recall that you recently called that a 'reverse narrative', but to me that term suggests something quite plain – a story told backwards, like those movies *Memento* and *Irréversible*. The Smith film does something different because it's always

moving forwards, only out of sync, so it's more something like a *preemptive* or *offset* narrative, a series of continual stopgaps. I wonder why that film seems like such a motif for Objectif? Maybe, apropos Kapuściński and Stevenson, it reminds us that actually we have no idea what's going to happen next; or rather, that we absolutely *do* have an idea, only it's a (very human) delusion. I think this is a quality common to a lot of the rocks in the Objectif cairn, a sensibility that expects the unexpected. But it's more kitchen sink than science fiction – and in my opinion all the more affecting for it.

D: Yes, 'reverse narrative' is certainly not quite right. I so hated the idea of *Memento* that I never saw it, and given its retrograde premise, I'm pretty sure that I'm allowed to dislike it in advance of seeing it. Meanwhile let me describe *The Girl Chewing Gum*, as I'm now aware that I'm writing not only for you in this e-mail, but at least equally for other readers if we follow through this idea we've started. So: *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) is a 16mm black-and-white film shot across a busy London street in one take on a typical day. About two minutes in, the camera begins to slowly pan up from street-level, across the storefront and to the second story roof where a public clock is mounted. You hear John Smith's voice-over, 'instructing' the camera:

> Hold it ... And I want the clock to move gently *towards* me. Stop. Now I want the long hand to move at the rate of one revolution every hour and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours. Now – two pigeons fly across and everything comes up again until the girl chewing gum walks across from the left.

So, maybe you get some idea of what's going on – John Smith simply filmed twelve minutes of a busy London street, and then went back after-the-fact and added his voice-over which seems to be the voice of the film's director instructing the actors, camera, etc. but which is really only a post-facto description of the film as it was originally shot. So it's a kind of reverse narration that preempts the action and seems to conjure the street scene into being. This reminds me of an idea that an artist friend shared recently that every narrative film is both a fiction (the story being told) and a documentary (about the making of the film). Simple.

I can describe at least the affect of the film, if not name what it's doing precisely (I suspect that's part of the point). With *The Girl*, yes it is an *offset* narrative, but the result (at least for me) is a kind of projected agency. That agency seems to move both forwards (the director's voice speaking things into action) and, equally, backwards. It's pretty quickly obvious what's happening (the film shot first, narration added in post-production). So you hear John Smith's directorial voice narrate a street scene *after* it happened *as if he had made it happen*. This is exactly the point. So when you call out the first idea I was offering for this Index on account of its *as if* quality, I suppose that's more or less precisely what I like about it.

S: Yeah … the frisson of perceiving an impossible simultaneity, something that doesn't register with the common laws of cause and effect.

D: Now I agree that typographically and otherwise it is a bit suspect (as if the small graphic/ typographic flagging up of a few words throughout should have so much an effect on a reader). And of course, this sense of a growing index in the reader's mind is precisely what should happen when you're reading a book anyway – particularly in a collected set of themed and edited conversations. The river that runs through all these conversations is maybe something near the looping process that you describe talking about with Will a few paragraphs ago. I can easily enough imagine that equally either your index retrieved through memory or alternately my own programmatic version of the same may *actually* be the consideration that does set off new loops of consideration and reconsideration.

I mentioned reading *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* with Eden over the last week, and the parenthetical goodies that Lewis Carroll addressed directly to the reader but which seem to arrive at a different time than the principal narration. It is as if these were added after the book was published. Anyway, I found a nice one to give you a clearer idea. I'm not sure how directly relevant this is – perhaps it's the recipe-and-the-cake quality of reading two times at once. Here: 'But it certainly was funny', (Alice said afterwards, when she was telling her sister the history of all this,) 'to

find myself singing “Here we go round the mulberry bush”. I don’t know when I began it, but somehow I felt as if I’d been singing it a long long time.’

*AS IF*!! I still can’t exactly put my finger on how *The Girl Chewing Gum* works and I don’t want to think about it too much. Right now it buzzes with potential and analyzing too closely would most certainly kill it. (Time will do the dirty work anyway, soon enough.) Still and meanwhile, back to the matter at hand: I can imagine a postindex that is projected back to the original text and which includes perhaps ten ‘keywords’ which are some kind of hodgepodge of the few you mention from the top of your memory in combination with the five words that my computer programs tell me are the most frequent. In fact, when I run it while telling the script to ignore words shorter than seven letters, the top five results amount to a certain poor poetry:

*something*
*between*
*performance*
*different*
*through*

S: Great. Let’s not do it.

## 3.3: SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Countless examples of modern and contemporary art involve such self-reflexive structural revelation, both at the level of the artworks themselves (the idea could equally apply to cubism and conceptualism), and more recently at the level of the social constructs that contain them; from, say, the various *Museum* projects of Marcel Broodthaers to the majority of work gathered under the broad auspices of Institutional Critique and Relational Aesthetics.

Then again, it could equally be argued that *any* art outside the mimetic tradition qualifies to some degree as ‘self-reflexive’ by virtue of its automatic claim to self-containment, which is to say any art not *primarily* conceived as a semblance of the world must be otherwise determined by some kind of ‘internal logic’ ontologically discrete from the usual grounds of representation. The broadest sense of self-reflexive – ‘something that refers to itself’, according to the beginning of this chapter – therefore reasonably applies to *any* instance of abstraction that has no ostensible referent beyond its own boundaries, which in turn implies any work since art in general became aware of its modern status as art for art’s sake.

The beginning of this inward turn is obviously contested, conceivably rooted in Impressionism, Realism or Romanticism, but we may as well follow Thierry De Duve’s *Kant After Duchamp* (1999) and take Duchamp’s 1917 readymade urinal *Fountain* as marking the moment.[14] De Duve argues that the readymades specifically mark the shift from conceiving of art in terms of discrete disciplines and value judgments (‘Is this a good painting?’) to general ontology (‘Is this art?’). He refers to its signal incident as ‘The Richard Mutt case’ – by which he means to circumscribe the entire scenography of cannily contrived incidents and accidents that projected the urinal into the canon. In its wake, artworks became less defined by their surface than their *surround* – by theory, backstory, reputation and other previously auxiliary factors, i.e. all the thinking *around and about* the work. Joseph Kosuth cemented this claim in his essay ‘Art after Philosophy’ (1969), proclaiming that ‘All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.’[15] A little later, an incredulous Tom Wolfe satirized the same in *The Painted Word*: ‘without a theory to go with it, I can’t see a painting’ he wrote

[14] De Duve, op. cit.

[15] Joseph Kosuth, ‘Art after Philosophy’, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991).

in view of the dominating influence of the 'kings of "Cultureberg"' – critics Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Leo Steinberg.[16]

In his essay 'Modernist Painting' (1960), Greenberg posits Kant's philosophical interrogation of philosophy itself (circa 1780) as the signal moment of self-consciousness and defining aspect of the modern frame of mind.[17] He then observes in the incipient avant-garde of the 20th century a transposition of the approach from philosophy to art. 'The essence of Modernism lies, as far as I can see it,' he wrote, 'in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.'[18] According to Greenberg, the modernist trajectory of painting (in the first instance) was headed towards what he theorized to be the medium's essential quality of 'flatness'. The subsequent vicissitudes of Abstract Expressionism gradually eschewed any reference to the world beyond the edge of the canvas in favour of 'pure' painterly abstraction, an appeal to the senses, and recourse to theory.

On the face of it, the thinking behind certain self-reflexive strategies that are now considered definitively modernist (breaking the fourth wall, for instance) appear contrary to the essence of Greenberg's ideas: where Brecht sought to bring art closer to life by removing the boundary between audience and artwork in order to be more directly affecting, Greenberg's modernist poetics worked in the opposite direction – towards self-containment, thereby *separating* the work from the world.

The disjunct dissolves, however, if we consider that where Brecht's Epic Theatre emphatically points at itself relative to its surroundings (its structural support), and that Greenberg's formalism equally points at itself, only as a discrete entity (its sovereign status). Another way of putting it is that where the former is outwardly self-reflexive *in order to seek relations at the level of the art context*, the latter is inwardly self-reflexive *in order to assert autonomy at the level of the art work*.

Similarly 'self-contained', much early Conceptualism from the 1960s onwards ostensibly maps a linguistic equivalent to Greenberg's modernism. But while Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism and other non-representational art operate in the realm of sensation and perception, early Conceptualist work was rooted in the thoroughly cerebral logic, linguistics and metaphysics of Anglo-American Analytical Philosophy. Kosuth denounced Greenberg's theories as amounting to little more than glorified taste. Despite the theoretical framework within which the Abstract Expressionists worked to 'exacerbate the medium's fundamental flatness', in Kosuth's view the validity of their results still consists in the critics' entirely subjective claims about what the works actually do (i.e. how and why they 'work'); and inasmuch as they are fundamentally subjective, he continues, they lack any wider objective *purpose*.

Kosuth further proposes that, in the wake of the death of the continental European philosophic tradition, a timely, relevant art ought to pursue a line corollary to the analytic propositions put forward by vanguard philosophers like I.A. Richards and A.J. Ayer. Early Conceptualism was duly grounded in recursive, tautological – and so wholly self-reflexive – rhetoric that referred exclusively to art (and language) *as such*. For Kosuth and his circle, such expressions had proper utility as *tools for thinking* to be applied to more empirical or 'synthetic' situations (which was, naturally, the same claim made for the logically watertight propositions of Analytic Philosophy). Taste had nothing to do with it.

[16] Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).

[17] See also §1.8.

[18] Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' [1965], in Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 5.




Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29) is prototypical. Or take for instance Keith Arnatt's *Keith Arnatt is an Artist* (1972): that statement on a wall next to a convoluted paragraph on semantics that clinically qualifies the claim. Or equally, the juxtaposed iterations of the 'same' item in physical, photographic and linguistic forms that constitute Kosuth's own *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Or the deadpan tautology of Ian Wilson:

> I. My project will be to visit you in Paris, April, 1970, and there make clear the idea of oral communication as artform.
>
> II. Ian Wilson came to Paris and talked about the idea of oral communication as artform.[19]

Following a more material strand, Hans Haacke assembled cybernetic quasi-sculptures to perform regulated feedback processes in his 1960s works of 'systems art'. The earliest involved natural ecologies, like *Ice Stick* (1966), a phallic copper coil attached to a refrigeration unit that gradually attracts environmental vapour manifest as a thick layer of frost. Later pieces explored social equivalents, typically by polling an audience and displaying the results in the same space, as in *Gallery Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile* (1969). More resonant, though, is his installation *Norbert: All Systems Go* (1971). Norbert was the name of a mynah bird trained to repeat 'All Systems go!' – a phrase famously exclaimed by cybernetic positivist and father of feedback, Norbert Wiener. Once exhibited in a cage in a gallery, however, the bird asserted its poetic license by refusing to comply, thus breaking the loop of 'progress'.[20]

In a further strain of conceptualist self-reflexivity, a work's technique, technology or material doubles as its subject matter. Roy Lichtenstein's paintings of brushstrokes from the mid-to-late 1960s, for example; Art & Language's acrylic painting of the words *Titanium calcium 83%* and *Silicates 17%* that literally amount to its *100% Abstract* title (1968); Rosemarie Trockel's industrially-manufactured wool tapestries (late 1980s) with their field of industry-standard wool icons; and more recently, Christopher Williams's photographs of dissected cameras, such as *Cutaway model Nikon Em* (2009), that show the mechanisms of the machine used to make the image you're looking at.

Structuralist film is categorically self-reflexive. For instance, Hollis Frampton's *Maxwell's Demon* (1968) comprises various shots of a man performing rudimentary bodily exercises. The footage is organized according to a Fibonacci scheme that performs the principle of entropy, and the mounting visual chaos emphasized by the sound of the film's leader holes catching in the editing apparatus. As such, the form of the film is tangibly entropic itself – an embodiment of its subject. In a similar vein, Morgan Fisher's *Projection Instructions* (1976) involves a sequence of variously audible and visible instructions for the film's projectionist, designed to cycle through the full extent of machine's

[19] Quoted in: Catherine Moseley, ed., *Conception. Conceptual Documents 1968 to 1972*, exhibition catalogue, Norwich Art Gallery, 2001, p. 51.

[20] It seems that the 'piece' never actually left the studio, only circulated as an anecdote. See: Luke Skrebowski, 'All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art', *Grey Room*, no. 30, Winter 2008.

capabilities. Text: ‘Turn the lens to zoom in until it is as far out of focus as possible.’ Audio: ‘Turn the lens back to optimum focus, then zoom out until it is as far out of focus as possible.’ And so on.

A century or so on from Duchamp, it’s safe to say that self-reflexivity has become one of contemporary art’s defining characteristics. Indeed, the curator Anthony Huberman recently listed self-reflexivity among five other key tropes of present-day art practice whose common denominator is something like ‘knowing disinterest’:[21]

☑ self-reflexivity,
☑ irony,
☑ strategic subversion,
☑ the “open work,”
☑ infinite juxtaposition,
and ☑ critical distance.

Against this inventory of what he sums up as an approach to art that consists in strategic ‘chess moves’, Huberman advocates something more instinctive and irrational – towards an ‘anarchistic knowledge’ that ‘proceeds against method, allowing accidental encounters and personal idiosyncracies to guide discoveries’ and ‘shock philosophy’s interiority’.[22] In the face of the *knowing* strategists, then, he counterposes a progressive *nonknowledge*, a loosening of received wisdom that ‘makes knowledge less knowledgeable’. The patron saints of Huberman’s nonknowledge are Swiss double act Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s blundering, hysterical alter-egos Rat and Bear, who wander off the ‘playing field’ altogether.[23] Touting an elliptical motto by Robert Filliou, ‘Art is what makes life more interesting than life’, Huberman asserts that in the wake of so much explicit strategy, work that otherwise operates ‘in the dark’ carries what he calls an ‘immanent truth’.[24]

The way of working I have in mind conflates Huberman’s extremes of knowing strategy and instinctive nonknowledge. Specifically, it *knowingly sets up the conditions for nonknowledge to play out* – a premeditated score for an unwritten script. Again, this is precisely why self-reflexivity is posited here as a *model* – a shorthand, a diagram, an emblem, a working principle – and never as a goal. The point is not to compile a history (or prehistory) of self-reflexive ends, nor an inventory of its means or effects, but rather to draw out its essential quality (or qualities) in view of articulating why such work seems *in some sense* to model Eco’s ‘form as a way of thinking’ – and then to hone in on precisely *what sense*.

Why? Because self-reflexive work *embodies* self-consciousness. In what sense precisely? First, in that it epitomizes the thinking process, which in turn implies self-criticism and a loop of improvement. Secondly, in the double, offset aspect that’s manifest as a consequence of this self-awareness. In sum, we can say that a ‘model’ self-reflexivity is *fundamentally constructive* and *inevitably two-fold*. I’ll elaborate on these qualities in the next sections, tracing their development as both driving force and consequence of the modern movement.

[21] Anthony Huberman, *For the Blind Man in the Dark Room Looking for the Black Cat that Isn’t There*, exhibition catalogue, St. Louis Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009, p. 143.

[22] Ibid., p. 146.

[23] The Rat and Bear, (presumably) Fischli and Weiss in fancy dress, starred in two films, *The Point of Least Resistance* (1981) and *The Right Way* (1983).

[24] See also: Anthony Huberman, ‘How to Behave Better’, *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #2, 2011. The notion of ‘immanent truth’ is consonant with Alain Badiou’s concept of ‘inaesthetics’. See §1.4.

## 3.4: VARIETIES OF MODERNISM

In its broadest sense, modernism refers to the cultural tendencies of the Modern Era rooted in the Age of Enlightenment, that itself began in Europe roughly around the end of the 17th century. It is foremost characterized by: the demise of religious belief; the positivist faith in science; the rapid expansion of markets and commodification brought about by industrialization, urbanization and capitalism; and the attendant growth and influence of mass culture.

In terms of the arts specifically, modernism advances from around the middle of the 19th century – from such as Manet and Mallarmé onwards. Gabriel Josipovici's recent *What Ever Happened to Modernism*? (2010) is a useful measure of the term's current sense. He begins by applauding art historian T.J. Clark's characterization of the movement, in *Farewell to an Idea* (2001),[25] as comprising a series of parallel and by no means necessarily commensurate tendencies. These include: an aggressive break with the prevailing milieu and its teleological tradition, now considered futile; allusions and references to earlier (pre-Romantic, particularly Classical) eras and forms, intended to draw parallels and distinctions between then and now; the self-conscious drive to 'progress' and 'innovate', oriented towards the vanguard and original, particularly nascent technologies like the industrial machine; the reduction to elemental forms, including primary colours, basic shapes and abstraction generally; the pronounced distinction between, and juxtaposition of, 'high' and 'low' culture; the portrayal of subjective inner consciousness; the focus on the metropolis; and those already-mentioned 'distancing' techniques applied to reveal a work's underlying 'works' – it's structure or artifice – at the same time as its ostensible subject matter.

Jan Verwoert has likewise recently noted that our current conception of modernism amounts to 'an essentially vague set of conflicting promises, made by different people for different purposes in different places around the globe in different ways'. He demonstrates the extent of these conflicting promises by itemizing a number of contradictory inclinations: 'lies and new myths, clarity and magic, truth and intensity, materialism and spiritualism, progress and redemption' and so on.[26]

Suffice to say that modernism in the arts circumscribes a vast range of intentions, which naturally gave rise to an equally wide range of outcomes that resist strict boundaries – and really any convincing collective definition beyond the common struggle against what was seen to be the irrelevance and impotence of prevailing forms. This is the vocation of any serious-minded avant-garde; and a further characteristic of modernist art is the gathering of this avant-garde into geographically-, socially-, intellectually- or formally-discrete (though often overlapping) groups and schools in the wake of the First World War, the most prominent and influential being Suprematism and Constructivism in Russia, and Futurism, Vorticism, De Stijl and Dada in Western Europe.

Earlier in this chapter I noted that, as the locus of the avant-garde shifted from Paris to New York in the decades surrounding the Second World War, modernism's meaning was honed and formulated by the authoritative New York critic Clement Greenberg, especially in relation to what was then still the dominant medium, painting. In *Kant after Duchamp*, De Duve suggests that Greenberg effectively wrote himself into a corner with his modernist theories – that 'flatness' was from the outset a fatally limited horizon. Modernism thus conceived was already an endgame; and with regard to painting in particular, the checkmate written into the theory all along – its epitome, its logical conclusion – was absolute flatness, a.k.a. the blank canvas. Greenberg duly recalibrated his modernism as a more generalized 'formalism'. This was an art not only for art's sake, i.e. freed from any outside commission to represent the world, but whose sole reference was to itself – and by implication to a particular academic discourse.

Greenberg later wrote that modernism 'defines itself in the long run not as a "movement", much less a program, but rather as a kind of bias or tropism: towards esthetic value, esthetic value as such and as an

[25] T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

[26] Both: Jan Verwoert, 'Crooked Modernisms – Oh! Crooked Indeed', *Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

ultimate.'[27] This is a long way from 'the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself'. In fact, he appears to acknowledge what Joseph Kosuth had argued in 'Art after Philosophy': that his own conception of modernism ultimately amounts to the terminal bias of subjective judgment, an end in itself otherwise known as *taste*, essentially elitist and so devoid of any obvious social connection or obligation.[28] In short, it's a conception of Modernism that's definitively inward- rather than outward-looking. Certainly, it's hard to see any 'objective' benefit of Greenberg's call for aesthetic entrenchment beyond the specious idea of an individual work or entire discipline becoming more intrinsically 'itself'. So what?

This line of thinking duly suffered a kind of nervous breakdown in the 1960s and 1970s, which precipitated various dematerializations or transformations of the art object (conceptualism, minimalism, arte povera, land art, installation art, anti-art, happenings, pop, op, etc.) alongside the explicitly politicized work of feminist and other previously ostracized groups … and then on to post-modernism.

Let's switch to consider these attitudes relative to graphic design. At the time of the first stirrings of modernist art in the late 19th century, graphic design was not yet recognized a discrete field. The design of books, posters, labels and other 'jobbing printing' was still part of the secretive 'black art' of the printing trade. Graphic design emerged as a distinct domain in the early 20th century to meet the myriad new demands of industrialization: to advertise, inform and entertain. It gradually supplanted pure typography, referring to the broader possibilities for combining text and images afforded by new technologies such as photography and mechanized typesetting.

The so-called heroic period between the wars was characterized by the rejection of orthodoxies similar to those that dominated fine art; broadly speaking, this involved a move from passive etiquette, beauty and order, to active reason, asymmetry and dynamism. But it's misleading to separate the fine art and graphic design of this era. Robin Kinross writes that modernist graphic design was – and often still is – seen 'as a bunch of artists blundering into the quiet provinces of the printing industry'.[29] Many of modernism's seminal figures made no distinction between art and design, and worked across mediums, from magazines to paintings. The schools and movements were likewise polymathic – to the extent that such loose, cross-disciplinary attitude can reasonably be considered another key aspect of modernist art and design.

The modernist narrative described by Boris Groys in his essay 'The Weak Universalism' (2010) is characterized by the perpetual domestication of socially constructive gestures.[30] He refers to modernism's stereotypical abstractions, elements and universals as 'weak' signs. Given that these forms were supposed to be read and understood by anyone and everyone, 'weak' is meant in a positive sense of being dilute enough to transcend individual artworks. In other words, the nebulous *spirit* of the common signal is more important than its material realization: weak signs carry an as-yet-unformed will to emancipation. However, says Groys, this spirited proliferation of weak signs was literally institutionalized by collectors and museums. When modernist artworks are exhibited and canonized, those weak forms turn 'strong'; they become fixed, reified, contained, and so implicitly finished. While such strong forms have become the popular, common impression of modernism today, their very establishment marks the end (and inverse) of those originally spirited social intentions.

Josipovici, too, argues against this 'strong' canonical view of modernism. The danger of seeing it this way, he says, is that modernism is reduced to a style, a period of art history, 'and therefore something that can be clearly defined and is safely behind us'. Properly conceived, he says, modernism amounts to an awareness of art's 'precarious status and responsibilities'. There's no turning back from this

[27] Clement Greenberg, 'Necessity of "Formalism"', *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1971, p. 171.

[28] Kosuth, op. cit.

[29] More on this in §7.2.

[30] Boris Groys, 'The Weak Universalism', *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

realization: art is 'a response by artists to that "disenchantment of the world"'[31] – a permanent force against alienation.

Fundamentally, Norman Potter also concurs with Josipovici and Groys. He notes that the usual means of accounting for the modern-ness of modern work is in terms of 'influences and precedents, the technological and social pressures, new materials and techniques, the convergent history of ideas, and so forth'. This, he says, results in a backwards-looking stasis – an orientation that ultimately duplicates those stagnant forces modernism reacted against in the first place. Potter emphasizes instead the legacy of what he prefers to call 'the modern movement', practising its principles rather than reiterating its styles, and elaborating them with reference to specific concrete instances rather than 'abstracted verbal propositions'. What Josipovici diagnoses as existential disenchantment with the world, Potter conceives in more grounded terms as the 'shoddiness of our environment'. He strongly urges those depressed by it to 'study the spirit of the modern movement',[32] yet warns that 'anyone who sees the modern movement in stylistic terms will fail to understand its radical nature.'[33]

The crucial period of modernism, says Potter, can be split into two distinct phases, both of which are necessary to forge a new paradigm.[34] The first, 'heroic' phase was characterized by negative, destructive tendencies *against what went before*; the second, 'social' phase by positive, constructive ones *in view of the new*. And the most fundamental principle of this second, constructive wave, he continues, is that of 'relation-seeking' – an approach grounded in human values rather than value judgements. The archetypal modernist-humanist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy once expressed the same sentiment with this motto: 'Man, not the object, is the end in view.'

## 3.5: THE MODERN MOVEMENT AS A CONSTANT HABIT

In 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' (1852), Karl Marx anticipated that an enlightened social revolution would avoid replicating the situation it would displace thanks to an unprecedentedly self-aware praxis (= practice affected by theory and vice versa). Individuals, he wrote, would 'criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, and return to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh'. However, Marx effectively short-circuits the argument by adding: 'until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible'.[35] This 'praxis' is thus 'constant' only up to a point – which is an oxymoron.

Like Marx, received wisdom holds that constructive criticism is essentially less a looping than a linear process: observation > reflection > criticism > agency > change. Across domains, this cause/effect model is variously considered the holy grail of 20th-century sociology, the basis of political activism, the premise of most psychotherapy, a founding principle of modern art, and the path of awareness generally. It is the psychological premise of, among others, the Frankfurt School, whose overarching project was founded on the assumption that revelation leads to freedom, and therefore change is tied to agency.

All of which might seem too banal to bother noting here, but in fact Gilles Deleuze asserts the opposite. The idea that awareness begets agency begets change, he says, is fundamentally flawed; change ought not be conceived as a hard-won result, but rather a precondition, a ground, a *constant*. In which case,

[31] Josipovici, op. cit., p. 11.

[32] Both: Potter, *What is a designer*, op. cit., p. 36.

[33] Ibid., p. 37.

[34] See the whole of chapter 4 ('What is good design?') in *What is a designer*, ibid.

[35] See: Dexter Bang Sinister, 'Good Shit', *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #4, 2012.

the critical question switches from ‘how to change things?’ to ‘how do things come to stay the same?’ What we really ought to scrutinize, according to Deleuze, is not the nature of change but of *habit*.[36]

In ‘The Surface of Design’, a chapter in *The Future of the Image* (2007), Jacques Rancière proposes to re-connect Greenberg’s ‘flatness’ with some sense of social efficacy by conceiving of aesthetic value in less hermetic and more openly egalitarian terms.[37] Like Kosuth, he condemns Greenberg’s concept of flatness as prime instance of art’s claim to ‘autonomy’; specifically, because it constitutes a perversion of actuality – a world warped by overextended art theory. Rancière counters that the concept of flatness could be more constructively (= democratically) used to refer to a cross-disciplinary ‘surface of communication’ on which ‘words and images slide into one another’. This, he concludes, ‘might lead us to reassess the dominant paradigms of the modernist autonomy of art and of the relationship between art forms and life forms’.[38]

In *Modern Typography: an Essay in Critical History*, design historian Robin Kinross starts from more or less the same premise as Greenberg, but ends up somewhere else altogether – or rather, doesn’t end.[39] He begins the book by claiming its title to be a tautology, inasmuch as the essence of modernity is already implicit in the term ‘typography’. Properly speaking, typography refers to *the articulation of visible language by mechanical means*. This implies the configuration of alphabetic elements according to reason – which is to say more or less definite, verifiable, *shared* meaning. Moreover, although his subject is certainly rooted in the Enlightenment, Kinross marks the birth of typography not with Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press (around 1440) but instead the publication of the first treatise on the subject – the first how-to guide, more than two hundred years later.[40] This is the moment when knowledge of the subject is written down, explicated, disseminated, *made public*.[41]

In other words, and consonant with Greenberg’s description of Kant turning philosophy’s tools on the domain itself, the field comes of age – matures – the moment it turns self-conscious. Moreover, because the publication of a treatise naturally prompts comparison, discussion, disagreement, counter-arguments, improvements and updates, such newfound awareness obviously sets off a chain of constant improvement. Like Greenberg, then, Kinross considers self-awareness to be the root of ‘modern’ work.

[36] Given the fact that things are changing all the time, Deleuze’s vantage conjures a vertiginous sense of *too much possibility* – to the extent that *limited agency* seems a more useful premise for production. In aesthetic rather than social terms, this idea is familiar enough from the panic that sets in at school when the teacher announces that today you can write about anything you like. In one particular passage of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), Robert M. Pirsig’s alter-ego-protagonist-teacher Phaedrus assigns his undergraduate class in Rhetoric an expansive but straightforward task: to write an essay on some aspect of the United States. He becomes preoccupied with one particular student who, despite a reputation for being serious and hardworking, finds herself in a state of perpetual crisis, unable to think of ‘anything to say’. He obliquely recognizes in her block something of his own paralysis in not being able to think of anything to say’ back to by way of help beyond suggesting a subject: the local Opera House. This doesn’t help her either, but after next proposing out of sheer frustration that she should focus on a single brick, something gives and the student produces a long, substantial essay about the front of the building. Initially baffled by his own involuntary insight, Phaedrus reasons that the student was blocked by the expectation that she ought to be repeating something already stated elsewhere, but freed by the comic extremity of his suggestion. There was no obvious precedent to an essay about this particular brick, therefore no right or wrong way to go about it, and so no phantom standard to measure up to. By this curious, circuitous, yet in retrospect perfectly logical method, the student is liberated to see for herself and act independently. In this way, Pirsig/Phaedrus instructively enacts his bald reconsideration of the question ‘how to teach?’ in front of his class. He continues to perform variations on this exercise for the rest of the semester (‘Write about the back of your thumb for an hour’), which yields similarly successful results, and concludes that this tacit expectation of imitation is the real barrier to uninhibited engagement, active participation, and a plausible sense of progress.

[37] Rancière, ‘The Surface of Design’, op. cit.

[38] Ibid., pp, 103–4.

[39] Robin Kinross, *Modern Typography* (London: Hyphen, 1990).

[40] The book in question is Joseph Moxon’s *Mechanick Exercises: or the doctrine of handy-works applied to the art of printing* (1683–4). See in particular *Modern Typography*’s first two chapters.

[41] More on this in §7.2. It’s worth noting, too, that, unusually if not exceptionally, typography is a medium that spreads knowledge about itself *via its own praxis*. Although there are novels about novel writing or films about film-making, for obvious reasons the book has traditionally been the self-accounting medium of choice in other fields too. In this sense, perhaps typography has always been a degree more self-reflexive than the other arts.

Unlike Greenberg, who as we have seen forces that awareness to specific ends as *isms*, Kinross maintains the 'open' aspect by ensuring that his own essay, a history of 'critical makers', remains a means:

> There is some connection between this critical spirit and an approach to the production of artefacts and their eventual form. This connection will be left undefined here: it is open for discussion and exploration.[42]

In *L'Abécédaire*, the series of TV interviews made in the late 1980s,[43] Deleuze draws a distinction between schools and movements. A school, he says, is a typically negative force characterized by authority, hierarchy and bureaucracy, and therefore heavy, fixed and exclusive. A movement, on the other hand, leans more towards intentions, attitudes and the passage of ideas, and is comparatively light, flexible and open. Surrealism was a model school, with André Breton serving as headmaster – imposing rules, sacking staff and settling scores; Dada was an exemplary movement – a flow of ideas that continues to touch many people, places and forms while still devoid of any sense of overriding order.

In the same spirit, Kinross prefers the 'ongoing' inflection of that largely lapsed term 'modern movement' to the usual Modernism. Though both obviously derive from the same cultural ferment, in recuperating the term here, too, I mean to emphasize and advocate a specific set of attitudes distinct from (or lost to) the more commonplace conception tethered to Greenberg's legacy. The term 'modernism' is anyway notoriously slippery and promiscuous, and one reason for siding with Kinross in supplanting it here is to avoid such disorienting multiplicity. Specifically, then, by 'modern movement' I'm alluding to a markedly social and implicitly social*ist* denomination of modernism. Antithetical to the set of stylistic tropes that amount to that canonical, formalist Modernism, the movement I have in mind consists in an essentially *pre-formalized* approach, i.e. in advance of being formed – hence the constant recourse to 'attitudes', 'approaches' and 'ways of working'. Typographer W.D. Dwiggins abruptly summed it up already back in 1928: '"Modernism" is not a system of design – it is a state of mind.'[44]

All of which chimes again with the conclusion of Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer' (1936),[45] his analysis of what constitutes a properly politicized art that ends on this self-reflexive note:

> It has perhaps struck you that the train of thought that is about to be concluded presents to the writer only one demand *to think*, to reflect on his position in the process of production.[46]

Here Benjamin advocates a constant state of checking oneself, a thinking-in-action in line with Marx's praxis without short-circuiting it, and which is wholly consonant with Deleuze's claim that adapting one's habits is a more opportune means of moving than the deluded reach for some specious idea of fundamental change. In this way, he equates an approach to aesthetics with social ethics – a 'political tendency' that's open-minded, flexible, and pragmatic, and which automatically precludes both abstract moralizing and aesthetic axioms. The same difference is apparent in a note by Kinross on the writings

[42] Kinross, *Modern Typography*, op. cit., p. 144.

[43] See chapter 2, fn. 45.

[44] W.D. Dwiggins, *Layout in Advertising* [1928] (New York: Harper, 1948). Dwiggins is also widely credited as having coined the term 'graphic designer' in 1922.

[45] See §1.4.

[46] Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', op. cit., p. 236.

of two other typographer-theorists, Stanley Morison and Eric Gill: ‘Where Morison is sententious, attempting timelessness,’ he writes, ‘Gill is down-to-earth and pointed.’[47]

## 3.6: EXTRA-CONSCIOUS

In *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, Josipovici concurs with Greenberg and Kinross that the fundamental property of all work properly conceived of as ‘modern’ is a newfound, progressive self-consciousness.[48] Josipovici follows Kinross, too, in claiming that the true legacy of modernism consists more in critical spirit than canonical style, and begins his own book by duly deliberating over the vague boundaries of his subject. He cites a number of early harbingers, an advance guard of the avant-garde who challenged formal conventions in ways that anticipated the full-blown ‘heroic’ assault of the early 20th century. Reaching back beyond the Enlightenment, even, Josipovici’s ur-examples register exhaustion, listlessness, stasis and chaos. Take Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancholia* (1514) – an etched portrait of ‘a terrestrial craftsman cut off from all tradition and therefore cut off from productive work … thinking furiously but incapable of action’[49], and so entirely emblematic of a general state of brooding self-awareness.



Switching to literature, Josipovici first cites Rabelais and Cervantes, whose work dislodged the trappings of genre fiction, more concerned with the ‘ontological status’ of the novel over and above the usual worldly topics. On a fault line between adhering to genre and transgressing it, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605) is a self-contained world of fiction that simultaneously points to itself *as* fiction, repeatedly stalling the reader by way of flippant, elliptical storytelling that precludes narrative closure and so too any straightforward absorption into the story. What instead ‘allows the book to keep moving’,[50] says Josipovici, is the oscillation between the ‘interior’ story and ‘exterior’ authorial offset – a ‘distancing’ effect as propulsive as Brecht’s Epic Theatre some 400 years later. Widely regarded as the first novel *and* the first anti-novel, *Don Quixote* is thus a particularly prescient instance of the twofold nature that would characterize much work made under modernism’s auspices.

Josipovici’s prehistory proceeds through the ‘unhappy consciousness’ of such as Hegel and Schiller, and later on to Wordsworth and Caspar David Friedrich, ‘not so much visionaries as explorers of what it means to see and what it means to paint or write’. All are concerned less with expression than the

[47] Kinross, *Modern Typography*, op. cit., p. 16.

[48] Josipovici, op. cit.

[49] Ibid., p. 24

[50] Ibid., p. 38.

*nature* of expression; more specifically, with the relationship – with the *tension* of the relationship – between the two. The most flagrant instance of this dialectical premise is Kierkegaard's philosophical double-novel *Either/Or* (1842), essentially a pair of discrete but editorially entwined books that represent two mutually exclusive ways of living: Romantic vs. Conservative. The dualism is mirrored in the book's conspicuously alternating styles, once again designed to draw attention to the way in the work has been assembled in order to achieve its effects. All is thrown into existential doubt, and the book emphatically *registers* this anxiety or 'unhappy consciousness'.

Josipovici finally arrives at the swell of disenchantment around the middle of the 18th century among a larger number of artists aware of the increasing impotence of conventional art forms. The emerging avant-garde considered the mimetic, narrative and anecdotal techniques of the Romantics to be useless extensions of bourgeois morality, incapable of conveying a plausible sense of contemporary existence, to the extent that

> everything we do seems false, laboured, second-hand; it feels like padding, pretence, a lie perpetrated by those who like to think of themselves as artists, in collusion with a market which knows that enough people need to feel they are in touch with some higher truth to make the art business profitable.[51]

The immediate response was to draw attention to the inadequacy of the old modes via satire – parodying them in order to push on to something else. And as in the work of those modernist forbears, this resulted in what Josipovici continually refers to as a 'double' or 'offset' effect. What's offset is again a *philosophical* aspect – a 'surplus' commentary on the nature of the work, a level out from its first-level 'purpose'. Whether picture, book, chair or building, this double layer performs awareness itself. Exemplary of the epoch, Mallarmé summed up this attitude in these two statements: 'I advance showing my mask', and 'My work is allegorical of itself'.

Recalling Kosuth's dismissal of Greenberg's creed of Modernism on the grounds of its 'anti-social' nature, Francis Bacon once dismissed the work of the Abstract Expressionists precisely for lacking any such 'offset':

> One of the reasons why I don't like abstract painting, or why it doesn't interest me, is that I think painting is a duality, and that abstract painting is an entirely aesthetic thing. It always remains on one level (...) I believe that art is recording; I think it's reporting. And I think that in abstract art, as there's no report, there's nothing other than the aesthetic of the painter and his few sensations. There's no tension in it.[52]

He goes on to assert that while artists 'owe a double allegiance: to the object out there in the world, and to the artwork',[53] the abstract painters have allegiance only to the artwork and themselves. Consequently, their work is fatally one-dimensional – both literally and metaphorically – and so ultimately solipsistic. In Bacon's view, then, 'pure' abstract painting eschews any clear connection to the world and declines to communicate, or at least refuses to be realistic or forthright about the limited *degree* to which it communicates. The vitality Bacon is after, adds Josipovici, is inherent in any work that recognizes the pitfalls equally native to realism and abstraction and seeks to conflate, if not necessarily resolve, the two.[54]

[51] Josipovici paraphrasing the spirit of Thomas Mann's novel *Dr Faustas*, ibid., p. 27.

[52] Ibid., p. 121.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., p. 187. This recalls the 'insurmountable dialectic' described in §1.5.

In his 1967 lecture 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', Italo Calvino describes how literature advances by rearranging its existing forms until one new arrangement *unwittingly* reveals a previously unexpressed aspect of the unconscious.[55] This age-old procedure, he says, accounts for the specifically self-reflexive tendencies of then-contemporary literature, especially the *nouveau roman*. By this point in the 20th century, he says, 'narrative possibility' has passed 'beyond the level of content to touch upon the relationship of the narrator to the material related and to the reader',[56] and this naturally yields a kind of meta-writing, a *writing about writing* that 'consists no longer in narrating but in saying that one is narrating, and what one says becomes identified with the very act of saying'.[57] Giorgio Agamben calls it 'the communication of communicability'.

Calvino concludes his lecture by paraphrasing German poet and critic Hans Magnus Enzenberger, who points to the recent work of Jorge-Luis Borges and Alain Robbe-Grillet as exemplary. Their 'two-tier' narratives, he says, are 'one inside another like Chinese boxes', designed to disorient and so force readers to mentally reorient themselves as they read – an effort that 'acquires a particular value, almost that of a training for survival.' Josipovici invokes a similarly intimate pedagogy when he describes the 'real protagonists' of *Don Quixote* as being 'the writer and the reader' who 'both undergo adventures enough to last them a lifetime, even if neither ever quite understands what these are.' He calls this obscure, latent comprehension an 'exercise in delay'.[58] The aesthetic experience is something to be worked at and lived through, more slow-burn apprehension than momentary revelation, which itself amounts to a further lesson – in attention.

'Such seeming double agency is important as an artistic strategy,' writes cultural critic Michael Bracewell, 'and contains within it the "hilarity" that Duchamp deemed vital to art.'[59] This implies that, at least since Duchamp instigated art's self-conscious paradigm, its humour is always the *knowing* variety. Meanwhile, art theorist Robert Garnett draws a useful distinction between humour and irony. Irony, he writes (quoting Deleuze), is 'always prepared in advance for the encounter'[60] – which is to say, essentially predetermined, thought-out, already 'complete' and so in a certain sense dead on arrival. In other words, says Garnett, there's always a *pre-text* to irony, always an idea *decided upon in advance* that the work is referring back to, or building upon. Humour, on the other hand, is an *immanent* intelligence that arrives not before but *after* the event – or rather during it, then lingering on. Norman Potter once referred to this state of positive precariousness as 'contingency without precedence'.[61]

In making a case for unaffected humour in the face of jaded irony, Garnett also advocates an open rather than closed approach. What makes for a decent art scene, he says, is 'attitude as an affirmation of possibility' – an approach that's impervious to cynicism and *positively unabashed*. Considered from this angle, self-reflexivity is a kind of 'duality machine' that shows the workings of the work in order to pre-empt and dismantle preconceptions and clichés that fall out of excess cynicism. When self-consciousness is geared towards progressive ends, the outcome is more humorous than ironic, rooted in good rather than bad faith, and designed to develop rather than denigrate.

[55] Italo Calvino, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts' [1967], *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), pp. 3–27.

[56] Ibid., p. 7.

[57] Ibid., p.25.

[58] All quotes ibid.

[59] Michael Bracewell, 'A Prose Kinema: Some Notes for Pale Carnage', Martin Clark, ed., *Pale Carnage*, exhibition catalogue, Arnolfini, Bristol, 2007, p. iv.

[60] Robert Garnett, 'How Criticism Lost its Sense of Humour', Robert Garnett, Andrew Hunt, eds., *Laboratory of Synthesis: Gest #1* (London: Book Works, 2008), p. 106.

[61] I'm paraphrasing; he actually wrote: 'Contingent affirmation in a world without precedent.' See: Norman Potter, 'The Literalist Movement', *Models & Constructs*, op. cit., p. 90.

To recap, the formal characteristic common to the various species of self-reflexivity listed above is an *explicit* revelation of what might *normally* be thought of as a work's structure (its form) along with what might *normally* be thought of as its substance (its content) – which is to say, making apparent at least two distinct levels. Whether an estranged Brechtian *lehrstuck*, an aside to the audience, a vertiginous *mise en abyme*, a story-within-a-story, or a knowing reference to some other fiction, all draw attention to their formal conceit. And in the most extreme cases, this parallax view of structure and substance is not merely constituent of the work, but its very essence. This is how self-reflexive work can serve as a 'model' of forming-as-a-way-of-thinking, and so too of its consequence, the symbiosis of form and content: because it caricatures the 'reconciliation'.

Inasmuch as a caricature is blatant by nature, a larger-than-life cartoon of itself, it is easy to 'read', to apprehend, and so to transpose. Like any good model, it's an effective means of both sketching an idea and abbreviating a larger point. It's easy to relate to, and so to relate to others.

## 3.7: CYNICAL LIMITS

Above I've noted a few positive payoffs of this fundamentally 'double, offset' aspect of self-reflexive art. First, apropos Bacon, that in 'double allegiance' to the real world (figuration) and the world of art (abstraction), it works towards assembling a communicative 'tension' between the two. Second, apropos Calvino, that by labyrinthine design it can exercise intellectual muscle as a kind of training for psychic survival. Third, apropos Garnett, that, when progressive in spirit, it fosters a galvanizing humour in the face of listless cynicism. Morevoer, apropos no-one in particular, it usefully caricatures the notion of symbiotic form/content and so propagates work that carries unequivocal *conviction*.

To switch tack slightly: if, per *The Open Work*, authentic art is considered the outcome of a perpetual dialectical movement through successive forms, which involves discarding those forms once rendered impotent by rote repetition,[62] surely it's disingenuous to claim that self-reflexive forms remain potent some hundred years after art's modern, self-conscious turn, some 50 after its appropriation by post-modern mass media (the burgeoning self-parody of broadcast TV and advertising, the demise of the suspension of disbelief, the ubiquity of what was previously 'behind the scenes'), and some ten after the ubiquity of Reality TV?

In other words, isn't self-reflexivity itself then a 'form' that has been so frequently and thoroughly employed as to neutralize (territorialize, recuperate, domesticate) any constructive purpose it might once have had? Isn't it as hackneyed a trope as those examples ridiculed by Eco, like Liberace's lyrics, or the poet who automatically rhymes 'remember' with 'September'? Seen in this light, self-reflexivity is merely one formal tactic among many, with as limited a lifespan as any other; productively surprising for a time, then increasingly superfluous.

Self-reflexivity is often conflated with irony, which is accurate inasmuch as both qualities share that offset aspect described above, that 'knowing' character, *more than meets the eye*. Both project a kind of false front, and are frequently sarcastic. In 'E Unibus Pluram', an essay on U.S. TV and literary metafiction, David Foster Wallace paraphrases essayist Lewis Hyde's writing on irony. According to Hyde, says Wallace, irony 'serves an almost exclusively negative function (…) critical and destructive', yet is 'singularly unuseful when it comes to anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.'[63] As such, he warns that irony ought to be used only in emergencies, before quickly supplanting a more constructive drive. Sustained over time, irony becomes 'the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage.'[64] But where the defining quality of irony is that surface meaning

[62] i.e. as discussed in §1.5 (b). See also the early examples of modernism cited above.

[63] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' [1993], *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), p. 67.

[64] Ibid.

and underlying meaning are deliberately different, self-reflexivity doesn't necessarily involve any such discrepancy.

And yet the gist of Wallace's (and Hyde's) concern remains valid enough for self-reflexive tendencies too; for if unchecked by its own critical premise, the approach soon amounts to little more than a show-offish, irritating conceit – from tactic to tic.[65] More pointedly, then: why might I seem to be suggesting that self-reflexivity maintains any efficacy within contemporary art when it's been so blatantly co-opted and troped-out everywhere else? The highly self-aware mechanisms of advertising, branding, or spin-doctoring are hardly news these days. Strategies that incorporate meta-awareness clearly manage to work just as well in the service of selling things regardless of the long-established critical-theoretical recognition of *how* and *why* they work. Here's a not untypical point of view from within contemporary art, not so much cynical as exhausted:

> 'It is certain that today self-consciousness (...) has bad press; and that if we are tired enough of philosophies of consciousness, we are even more fatigued by their logical completion in reflexivities, self-knowing and self-aware lucidities, and ironies of all kinds.' And so we arrive at our final destination, namely Grand Hotel Irony, just down the road from Grand Hotel Abyss (...)[66]

Wallace's essay reflects on how, in the second half of the 20th century, under the pervasive influence of savvy advertising, major U.S. TV channels began to parody their own formats and so simultaneously satirize their viewers. Amid general concern over the increasing amounts of time people spent watching TV, says Wallace, cutting edge programmers adopted the detached posturing of postmodern irony (TV shows about making TV shows, for instance). Recall the period related earlier in this chapter, when the early stirrings of the modernism responded against Romantic orthodoxies by satirizing them; this was TV's equivalent reaction to the increasingly tired formats of its own culture, which by the middle of the 20th century was dominating and affecting all the other arts. Only by now such 'first wave' self-reflexivity had undergone a change in kind: the impulse was not so much critical and constructive, as cynical and commercial. In Wallace's estimation, the idea was to flatter the already-excessive TV viewer with in-jokes, affirming his or her sense of self-awareness and sophistication, and simultaneously diverting concerns about the danger of watching too much TV. The net effect was to maintain the status quo, i.e. a captive audience (= advertising revenue). Self-reflexivity was employed to maintain the dominance of TV rather than dissemble it.

Josipovici likewise describes this cycle of domestication, in which originally constructive criticism turns *de*structive, progressively pleased with itself and so congealing into bad rather than good faith:

> The irony which at first made one smile, which was at first so satisfying, the cynicism, which at first was used to puncture pretension, in the end comes to seem like a terrible constriction, a fear of opening up to the world.[67]

When self-awareness becomes a trap rather than a tool, self-reflexive forms become stylish tropes –*effects* contrived towards particular (e.g. commercial, show-offish, or self-aggrandizing) ends. This brand of self-reflexive work totes an essentially cynical and superficial *semblance* or *gesture* of

[65] Consider for instance this perfectly ironic description of the self-reflexive skills necessary to claim status as a contemporary philosopher in 1969: 'Whereas the entire *Witz* of philosophy is to make the subject "I" into an object and vice versa, the philosophy of the *Witz* nowadays is one that similarly tries to ensure that the ideas of this subject-object are treated sub-objectively; in other words, I am being profound and serious if I say: "I am registering the fact of reflecting on the reflexion of a reflexion on a brush" ... Such depths are beyond the reach of some people!' Jean Paul, quoted in Dällenbach, op. cit., p. 38.

[66] Dieter Roelstraete, '(Jena Revisited) Ten Tentative Tenets', *e-flux journal*, no. 16, May 2010, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/137. The first part of the paragraph quotes Frederic Jameson.

[67] Josipovici, op. cit., p. 174.

criticality. It's a clip-on option –'equivocal' in the sense that, cultural condition permitting, the choice of trope might equally have been its inverse: sincerity.

Recall Susan Sontag's distinction between style and stylization in 'On Style':

> 'Stylization' in a work of art, as distinct from style, reflects an ambivalence (affection contradicted by contempt, obsession contradicted by irony) toward the subject-matter. This ambivalence is handled by maintaining, through the rhetorical overlay that is stylization, a special distance from the subject.[68]

She then posits 'style' as the opposite – which is to say a mark of engagement with (investment in, commitment to) a certain subject matter. For Sontag, style is virtually synonymous with art itself, characterised by the *lack* of distance or disinterest, the opposite of ambivalence.

As useful as Sontag's distinction is, and while I essentially concur, 'style' still smacks too much of 'stylishness' for my taste – especially given the word's 50 or so years' worth of corruption by postmodernism and 'designer' culture since. I prefer to think the difference in terms of trope and temperament. Self-reflexivity conceived of as a *trope* describes that applied as a strategy, with what Sontag summarizes as more or less deliberately contemptuous, ironical or disinterested intent.
A positively *temperamental* self-reflexivity, on the other hand, derives from an inherently earnest,c self-conscious and critical sensibility. Less extrinsically *applied to the work*, this one is more intrinsically *drawn out while working on it*: the trace of a naturally candid disposition.

## 3.8: TROPE VERSUS TEMPERAMENT

This section comprises my contribution to an afternoon of talks at Artists Space, New York, titled 'The Whole of Troy Is A Horse',[69] programmed in response to the exhibition then installed, *Anarchism Without Adjectives: On the Work of Christopher D'Arcangelo (1975–1979)*.[70] It was preceded by some thoughts on the work of British conceptual artist Keith Arnatt by Mike Sperlinger, who organized the event, and followed by cultural critic Esther Leslie on Walter Benjamin's concept of 'petrified unrest'. In the event, my stint was interrupted by representatives of the then-nascent Occupy Wall Street movement, which added curious gravitas the whole idea of 'getting out of the horse' in ways I still haven't been able to unravel.

Good afternoon.

The following thoughts, excerpts and afterthoughts are assembled in response to an invitation from Mike to consider 'the problem of self-reflexivity and its limits'. I'll start by reading his introduction:

> 'No one knows, or even feels, that anything is a limit or defect, until he is at the same time above and beyond it,' declared Hegel. This assertion is not only enough to send most analytic philosophers into frothing apoplexy; we might ourselves think that we know (or even feel) that it is proved false in every living person's life, on a more or less minute-by-minute basis.
>
> Self-reflexivity certainly allows us to confront, and perhaps to transcend, some of our limits. But what happens when our consciousness

[68] Sontag, 'On Style', op. cit., p. 28. See §1.8.

[69] 12 October, 2011.

[70] *Anarchism Without Adjectives: On the Work of Christopher D'Arcangelo (1975–1979)*, Artists Space, New York, 10 September – 16 October, 2011.

> of our situation, for example, is in excess of our ability to change it? In such circumstances, is self-reflexivity productive or just a band-aid for a beautiful soul? Peter Sloterdijk notoriously diagnosed the universe of late capitalism as governed by cynicism, or 'enlightened false consciousness': we can see through the ideology, but, powerless to overcome it, we play along anyway, resigned and complicit. We can't go on. We'll go on.
>
> In art there has been a strain of work since at least the 1960s which has explicitly reflected on its own conditions of possibility, from Adrian Piper and Lee Lozano to Andrea Fraser. Institutional critique, in the broadest sense, was a concerted effort to address reflexively art's own (political) limits, but, as Fraser and others have noted, it has had to navigate an increasingly narrow strait between piety and resignation. Self-reflexive gestures seem to risk becoming rote, if not irrelevant, or as the artist Merlin Carpenter put it: '"Get out of the horse", Colin de Land used to say to artists who claimed to criticize from within – but you get out today and you are still in a bigger horse, the whole of Troy is a horse.'
>
> How can we distinguish whether self-reflexivity is being used as a resource for better engaging the world, or as a solipsistic retreat from it? What do we do when we realize we have reached the limits of a practice, artistic or otherwise? And when, rather than seeking new levels of reflection, do we simply seek the exit sign?

My contribution extends from some fairly involved letters Mike and I have been exchanging over the past year or so. Self-reflexively enough, our discussion initially concerned the changing nature of the journal *Dot Dot Dot*, which I co-edited since 2000 up until the 20th and final issue about a year ago. The exchange began after I asked Mike to elaborate on an offhand remark he'd made (also in a public talk) in which he described the journal as being defined by 'a discourse that is always to a higher power'.[71]

While I could *feel* what he meant by this pithy claim – and its veracity – I found myself curiously unable to decompress it into a more discursive and answerable form. In fact I had already been trying for some time to get straight in my own mind, with little success, some thoughts about self-consciousness and self-reflexivity that Mike's summary seemed to insinuate – so I asked him to carry on. Such is the luxury of being an editor: getting other people to think and write about things you're not quite capable of thinking and writing about yourself. If you're lucky.

*Dot Dot Dot* had started out as a journal both from and about graphic design, but over its decade had equally bled into the other so-called liberal arts. While happily untethered from any particular domain, it did, however, become increasingly defined by a strain (in both senses) of self-reflexivity – individual pieces and overall production processes that reflected emphatically back on the magazine itself, exposing its mechanics or otherwise projecting some sort of meta-editorial vantage. Over the years this happened quite organically, by which I mean without our contriving or really even noticing it; but latterly I had begun to wonder why. Specifically, I wanted to probe a strongly held but, the more I thought about it, less-than-watertight conviction that there was something inherently *righteous* about self-reflexive work, something morally correct in its claim to 'transparency'. It became increasingly difficult to gloss over the precise nature of this implied virtue, or at least explain in what sense this 'transparency' was, say, honest rather than, say, trite.

The sort of question gnawing at me was: why assume self-reflexivity is a fundamentally ethical strategy, especially seeing as it often involves some form of trickery, or at least a certain clever-clever and often seemingly cynical intent? Or equally: why consider self-reflexivity a viable way of working

[71] See §2.3(b).

given that it's by now perhaps half a century since it had any real power to surprise, upset, loosen, dismantle and shift points of view; since it had the critical collateral to force an active rather than a passive reading; not to mention the considerable distance of a number of obvious ancestors at least as old as, say, Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy? Why now, still, when self-reflexivity permeates all media, most apparent in the hypertrophy of so-called Reality TV where the so-called 'reality' under observation is patently not all that real, in which whatever-the-set-up comes implicitly bracketed by at least one pair of automatic scare quotes, and where the tropes of self-reflexivity – the structure laid bare, the suspension of the suspension of disbelief – have been assimilated, domesticated, and *to all intents and purposes* rendered passé?

In view of all this, I'd been talking with Mike about David Foster Wallace, the American writer whose work I first discovered in the wake of his untimely death in 2008. Prompted by reading his novels, shorter fiction, essays, non-fiction and interviews, I began to think that there are perhaps two distinct types of self-reflexivity which, in a dumb and deliberately provocative way, I'll classify here simply as 'good' and 'bad', though it's by no means really so clear cut.

The distinction I'd like to draw is between self-reflexivity as *trope* (that's the bad one) and self-reflexivity as *temperament* (that's the good one). Self-reflexivity conceived as a trope is essentially cynical: a stylistic conceit, an adopted attitude, a contrived effect. It's a form *applied to* a subject, equivocal and arbitrary. Self-reflexivity conceived temperamentally, on the other hand, is essentially affirmative – a quality *drawn from working on* material, and consequently unequivocal, specific. It carries the sense that it 'couldn't be helped', that it's inevitable.

Umberto Eco has a nice way of putting this in his book *The Open Work*. 'Form must not be a vehicle for thought,' he says; 'it must be a way of thinking.' The easiest way to clarify what that means is by using the example of what we all probably have in mind when I say 'activist art'. Form conceived as a vehicle for thought implies starting with a statement in mind, then casting around for a form in which to dress it. Form conceived as a way of thinking, on the other hand, implies working out that statement *through the manner in which you make it*. In short, your ethics – the way you choose to live and work – rub off on the result. Walter Benjamin called this political 'tendency' – as opposed to ideology.[72]

The same chapter in Eco's book – which happens to be titled 'Form as Social Commitment' – contains another line germane to today's topic. He says: 'It is impossible to describe a situation by means of a language that is not itself expressed *by* that situation.'[73] This idea might sound familiar to anyone who knows a bit about mathematics, as it approximates the mathematician, logician and philosopher Bertrand Russell's famous well-known Paradox, which asserts that any account of containment always contains one root-level instance that cannot itself be contained by that account. In other words, there's always an exception to the rule. To cut a long story short, this was effectively dismissed (or circumvented) by Russell at the turn of the 20th century, and then resolved – or rather met head-on – later by his fellow mathematician, logician and philosopher Kurt Gödel's theorems of 'incompleteness' a few decades later.[74]

I mention this only to float the idea that Gödel's incompleteness is somewhat akin to Eco's notion of an Open Work – by which he means art that's left radically undone to be somehow completed during a specific performance by the artist, performers or audience (or is in some other way ambiguous by design). And both align, too, with an equivalent incomplete- or open-ness suggested by that stereotypically 'transparent' quality of self-reflexive art I mentioned earlier. To be clear: such work is 'open' in the sense of exposing its workings, and 'incomplete' in the sense that such a naked state reveals how it can always be further adapted, or could have been otherwise.

[72] See §1.4.

[73] See §1.5(b).

[74] More on this below in §3.11.

Anyhow, by conflating these ideas I mean to more robustly assert three things. First, that self-reflexive temperament is 'sovereign' or 'independent' or 'free-spirited' or 'open-minded' or simply *itself* enough to let a piece of work be carried along by its subject matter. Then that the impossibility of 'describing a situation by means of a language that is not itself simultaneously expressed by that situation' needn't be deemed a hindrance or disqualifier, but rather – with a nod to Gödel – a catalyst, a driving force. And finally, that the temperament that accepts the limitations of a given situation yet carries on regardless in this manner amounts to a working 'ethics'.

I'm using scare quotes there myself as I'm scared that Mike now has his head in his hands. He can't stand the sort of fuzzy humanism this is starting to sound like. I should have said before that in our letters back and forth, Wallace soon became 'a useful thistle on which to differ', as Mike nicely put it. And so now I'm going to complement my own soft claims by drawing on the hard fact of Wallace's writing. I'll read four brief excerpts, which are, of course, the literary equivalent to Mike showing images of Keith Arnatt's photographs a few minutes ago: some textual snapshots.

Simply put, Wallace does self-reflexivity better, or at the very least to a degree – an *n*th degree – more than anyone else. Before becoming a writer, he, too, was an accomplished student of mathematics, logic and philosophy. By way of introduction, then, the first extract is from a relatively late non-fiction book that conflates this triad of interests. It's called *Everything and More*, essentially a history of the concept of infinity with particular reference to its key articulator, Georg Cantor. The following is freely assembled from Wallace's opening chapter:

> Here is a quotation from G.K. Chesterton: 'Poets do not go mad; but chess players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I am not attacking logic: I only say that this danger [of madness] does lie in logic, not in imagination.' [He] is wrong in one respect. Or at least imprecise. The danger he's trying to name is not logic. Logic is just a method, and methods can't unhinge people. What Chesterton's really trying to talk about is one of logic's main characteristics – and mathematics': Abstractness.
>
> Abstract thinking tends most often to strike during moments of quiet repose. As in for example the early morning, especially if you wake up slightly before your alarm goes off, when it can suddenly and for no reason occur to you that you've been getting out of bed every morning without the slightest doubt that the floor would support you. Lying there now considering the matter, it appears at least theoretically possible that some flaw in the floor's construction or its molecular integrity could make it buckle, or that even some aberrant bit of quantum flux or something could cause you to melt right through. Meaning it doesn't seem logically impossible or anything.
>
> – at some point you realize that the process ... can, at least in principle, go on forever. The ability to halt a line of abstract thinking once you see it has no end is part of what usually distinguishes sane functional people – people who when the alarm finally goes off can hit the floor without trepidation and plunge into the concrete business of the real workaday world – from the unhinged.[75]

OK. Now, the next excerpt is also non-fiction, drawn from a sprawling essay about the relationship between American TV and metafiction since around the middle of the 20th century. More or less synonymous with 'postmodern literature', metafiction refers to the sort of emphatically self-reflexive writing typical of the younger generation working after the War. It's an umbrella term for fiction that is, at least in part, about the writing of fiction. Its figureheads include such as Thomas Pynchon, John

[75] David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (New York: Norton, 2003), pp. 6–17.

Barth and William Gaddis; and Wallace himself is widely considered a prime inheritor. This next fragment demonstrates his virtuosity in both perceiving and articulating spiralling levels of awareness:

> A problem with so many of us fiction writers under 40 using television as a substitute for true espial ... is that TV 'voyeurism' involves a whole gorgeous orgy of illusions for the pseudo-spy, when we watch. Illusion (1) is that we're voyeurs here at all: the 'voyees' behind the screen's glass are only pretending ignorance. They know perfectly well we're out there. And that we're there is also very much on the minds of those behind the second layer of glass, viz. the lenses and monitors via which technicians and arrangers apply enormous ingenuity to hurl the visible images at us. What we see is far from stolen; it's proffered – illusion (2). And, illusion (3), what we're seeing through the framed panes isn't people in real situations that do or even could go on without consciousness of Audience. I.e., what young writers are scanning for data on some reality to fictionalize is *already* composed of fictional characters in highly formalized narratives. And, (4), we're not really even seeing "characters" at all: it's not Major Frank Burns, pathetic self-important putz from Fort Wayne, Indiana; it's Larry Linville of Ojai, California, actor stoic enough to endure thousands of letters (still coming in, even in syndication) from pseudo-voyeurs berating him from being a putz from Indiana. And then (5) it's ultimately of course not even actors we're espying, not even people: it's EM-propelled analog waves and ion streams and rear-screen chemical reactions throwing off phosphenes in grids of dots not much more lifelike than Seurat's own impressionist commentaries on perceptual illusion. Good lord and (6) the dots are coming out of our *furniture*, all we're really spying on is our own furniture, and our very own chairs and lamps and bookspines sit visible but unseen at our gaze's frame as we contemplate 'Korea' or are taken 'live to Jerusalem' or regard the plusher chairs and classier spines of the Huxtable 'home' as illusory cues that this is some domestic interior whose membrane we have (slyly, unnoticed) violated – (7) and (8) and illusions ad inf.[76]

Next up, here's an excerpt from a short story that satirizes the uses and abuses of self-reflexivity in the advertising industry. It's called 'Mister Squishy', the name of a (fictional) confectionary firm that specializes in cutting-edge cake snacks. Most of the action takes place inside the company's conference room, where a motley focus group is working out the line to spin on a new luxury chocolate product provisionally named *Felony!* In this relentless excerpt, one marketing man is telling another about a particularly convoluted campaign:

> ... the idea's gist's thrust here involved what was known in the industry as a Narrative (or, 'Story') Campaign and the concept of making some new product's actual marketers' strategies and travails themselves a part of that product's essential Story – as in for historic examples that Chicago's own Keebler Inc.'s hard confections were manufactured by elves in a hollow tree, or that Pillsbury's Green Giant-brand canned and frozen vegetables were cultivated by an actual giant in his eponymous Valley – but with the added narrative twist or hook now of, say for instance, advertising Mister Squishy's new *Felony!* Line as a disastrously costly and labor-intensive ultra-gourmet snack cake which had to be marketed by beleaguered legions of nerdy admen under the thumb of, say, a tyrannical mullah-like CEO who was such a personal fiend for luxury-class chocolate that he was

[76] Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', op. cit., pp. 23–4.

> determined to push *Felonies!* into the US market no matter what the cost- or sales-projections, such that (in the proposed campaign's Story) Mister Squishy's advertisers had to force Team Δy to manipulate and cajole Focus Groups into producing just the sort of quote unquote 'objective' statistical data needed to greenlight the project and get *Felonies!* on the shelves, all in other words comprising just the sort of arch tongue-in-cheek pseudo-behind-the-scenes Story designed to appeal to urban or younger consumers' self-imagined savvy about marketing tactics and 'objective' data and to flatter their sense that in this age of metastatic spin and trend in the complete commercialization of every last thing in their world they were unprecedentedly ad-savvy and discerning and canny and well nigh impossible to manipulate by any sort of clever multimillion-dollar marketing campaign. This was, as of the second quarter of 1995, a fairly bold and unconventional ad concept.[77]

Finally, from the same collection of stories, *Oblivion*, here's a fragment from the climax of 'Good Old Neon', a curiously matter-of-fact account by an ambiguously fictive narrator 'David Wallace' of the mundane events leading up to the suicide of an identity-scrambled protagonist, who ends up fatally driving his car off a bridge. The story has at least two more-or-less parallel endings that are not exactly 'false' or 'alternate,' but rather convey something of the multiple, consecutive dimensions of time, character and consciousness that amount to the story's description of death – a tantalizing payoff that's advertised early on in the text:

> All right, now we're coming to what I promised and led you through the whole dull synopsis of what led up to this in hopes of. Meaning what it's like to die, what happens. Right? This is what everyone wants to know. And you do, trust me. Whether you decide to go through with it or not, whether I somehow talk you out of it the way you think I'm going to try to do or not. It's not what anyone thinks, for one thing. The truth is you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes.
>
> But it does have a knob, the door can open. But not in the way you think. But what if you could? Think for a second – what if all the infinitely dense and shifting worlds of stuff inside you every moment of your life turned out now to be somehow fully open and expressible afterward, after what you think of as you has died, because what if afterward now each moment itself is an infinite sea or span or passage of time in which to express it or convey it, and you don't even need any organized English, you can as they say open the door and be in anyone else's room in all your own multiform forms and ideas and facets?[78]

[77] David Foster Wallace, 'Mister Squishy', *Oblivion* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004), pp. 60–1.

[78] Cutting and pasting fragments from Wallace's prose was unexpectedly difficult; not because apt examples were lacking (quite the opposite), nor because they were particularly diminished by being cut away from the body (though they were notably difficult to compress), but because on closer reading the writing seems so specifically designed for personal, private reading as to defy any attempt to speak them in public. This is only partly explained by Wallace's famously extensive use of footnotes, endnotes and other devices that require clumsy and fatally disorienting or distracting explanation when spoken; it's also due to the *rhetorical* mechanisms that demand intimate, concentrated reading. That's to say, the haywire combination of extremely long

To drive toward some semblance of a conclusion, then: Wallace is my prime instance of a breed of self-reflexivity that is the inevitable trace of a particular artistic temperament, rather than applied as a cynical trope; in other words, a temperament that *deposits* its self-reflexivity rather than *constructs* it, and as such more engagingly convinces, moves an audience. Curiously enough, Wallace often gets criticized for being exactly the opposite: cold, show-offish, aloof, macho, chauvinist even. So maybe all this is equally a matter of one's own temperament as a reader. This is the sort of chicken-and-egg observation I imagine will inevitably mark a lot of today's un-conclusions.

Mike would argue – has argued – that Wallace is solipsistic, which can be equally grating or soporific, but for me the work is fundamentally directed out at the world, never merely turned back in on itself. In the words of a designer called Norman Potter, it is essentially *relation-seeking*. This qualifies Wallace, too, as an instance of what his fellow writer and close friend Jonathan Franzen once called a 'contract author', a label he invented to describe work that explicitly sets out to honour a contract between author and reader. The contract writer is not arrogant, aloof, cut-off or self-obsessed, but writes above all with commitment to the idea of establishing a mental bond, determined to connect.

So: as you can hopefully glean from these excerpts, Wallace's writing might be profoundly, even preposterously, turned in on itself; but it is *simultaneously* directed outwards – and it's precisely this doubling, this both-at-once-ness, that's the crux. Incidentally, or not, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* was reportedly a favourite work of his.

Naturally, Wallace had already considered all I'm trying to say – to that *n*th degree I mentioned before – and duly deposited a number of far more phosphorescent self-analyses. In one short piece on teaching Kafka, for example, he portrays American humour as a unidirectional cause-and-effect mechanism that works towards simply 'getting it', and contrasts it with Kafka's far more complex and ambiguous variety. For Wallace, a typical Kafka character is a deeply ironic proposition – 'not only not neurotic but anti-neurotic [which is to say:] heroically sane … the multivalent Both/And logic of the, quote, "unconsciousness".'[79] Otherwise put, Kafka's humour is deliberately designed to rub both ways: is funny and not funny at all (is funny-ha-ha and funny-peculiar), and therefore true to the everyday schizophrenia of human consciousness that is tragically and thankfully equipped to laugh at despair.

The point is, Wallace's writing is similarly multivalent, or schizophrenic – at once involuted *and* outgoing; and this, too, sums up its relation to today's topic. It is neurotically aware of the futility of transcending one's condition, yet heroically attempts to transcend it regardless. Wallace once sent a letter to an editor at Penguin explaining his work to be neither primarily 'realism' nor 'metafiction' but, if anything, 'meta-the-difference-between-the-two'. This suggests a dogged pursuit of his own 'Both/And' formulation, pushing for a third way in order to escape the trappings of one-dimensional self-reflexivity

And it's precisely this *attempt* that makes the difference, because although the contradiction can't be overcome, it *can* be transformed – into art. What appears to be a dead-end from one perspective looks like a life-force from another; it all depends on the end of your telescope.

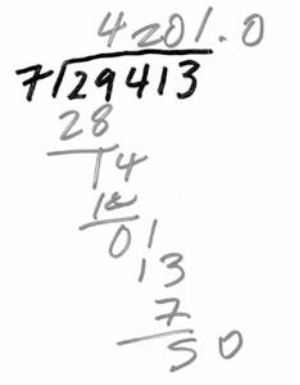
Thank you.

sentences, clauses within clauses, speech rhythms, repetitions and deliberately elliptical phrasing demand the reader's own looping back and forth, reading and re-reading, sticking, stalling and starting again; all of which necessitates considerable – and entirely profitable – mental labour. This is particularly true of that last extract from 'Good Old Neon', in which repeated re-reading to work out what and how and *who* the hell is going on is necessary not only to 'fully apprehend the meaning' or 'make sense of the plot', but more profoundly to *instill the dread of extreme self-consciousness that is its subject*. This is one litmus test of what I'm calling temperamental self-reflexivity: that it can't be readily reduced, modulated or paraphrased because too idiosyncratic to survive any transplant – and it all tends to wither in explanation.

[79] David Foster Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness' [1999], *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), p. 64.

On reading this talk, my friend Sharon Kahanoff wrote to me that ‘a self-consciousness bearing out to the world is engaging and a self-reflexivity boring in is a kind of solipsistic retreat.’[80] Note the double meanings of her ‘bearing’ and ‘boring’: the former in the senses of being *borne* (i.e. carried) as well as *borne out* (i.e. fulfilled) that together imply a sociable, relation-seeking, genial work that aspires above all to communicate; the latter in the senses of *tiresome* (i.e. for anyone other than its maker, thereby eschewing the community that communication presupposes) as well as *drilling in* (i.e. going underground, hermetic, solipsistic).

Moreover, she calls for a self-reflexivity ‘that *bears* its self-reflexivity, not *bares* it’, which is to say, for work that offers up its workings as a matter of course rather than exhibitionism – like the graphic trail of a piece of long division written out by hand:




This is the reflex tendency of an open demeanour, a candid disposition: contrary to the self-righteous pomp of top-down reflexivity, Sharon argues for an easygoing ground-up consciousness to the point that it ‘becomes a *material* like any other, toward the *expression* of your working out the question, instead of the goal.’

## 3.9: DUPLICITOUS EXAMPLE

A few months later another friend, Perri McKenzie, sent along this piece of steady self-analysis:

> The key, I think, to what I’m trying to do, is attempting self-reflexivity. Recently I spoke about Jack Spicer translating the poetry of Federico Lorca *through poetry* (rather than another language). This might be further articulated as ‘pushing beyond a discipline through the *manner* of that pushing’, or as Gilles Deleuze says in *L’Abécédaire*, ‘I want to get out of philosophy through the means of philosophy.’ This is analogous to my position – to get outside of art through the means of art.[81]

Using the means in order to transcend the means recalls Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous injunction to ‘throw away the ladder’ of his philosophy after having surmounted it. There’s nothing remotely cynical or ironic in Perri’s (or Wittgenstein’s) slant on self-reflexivity either; it’s not a ‘move’ or a ‘tactic’ or a ‘strategy’, more a quietly personal philosophy that bears a sense of having slowly and even surprisingly come to realize its own nature. (Here I mean philosophical in the soft, patient sense: *Well I’m trying to be philosophical about it.*) This modest, unassuming disposition chimes, too, with the un-proprietary, cross-disciplinary and polymathic propensities of the majority of those whose work I’m writing about here. Hopping across the nominal boundaries of whatever field they’re rooted in without making a big deal about it, their work conveys a felt rather than theoretical sense of disciplinary borders being more

[80] Email from Sharon Kahanoff, 23 February, 2012.

[81] Email from Perri McKenzie, 1 March, 2012. (I might as well add: ‘to get out of design *by design*.’) As it happens, the piece of long division above is hers too. See: Perri McKenzie, ‘Δ’, *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #2, 2011.

arbitrary and porous than is generally assumed. Consider, for instance, that art, poetry and philosophy are all compressed into my friend's brief paragraph above.

Now I want to consider all the above in view of two different series of work made in the last decade by British artist and close friend Ryan Gander.

**(a) A being-word rather than a doing-word**

In a talk I saw Ryan give a couple of years ago at UCLA in Los Angeles, he made the following claim:

> Between my having an idea for a piece of work and its eventual production, nothing really changes. There's no 'development'. The product arrives fully formed, so there's a 1:1 relationship between idea and result.

He then proceeded to denounce contemporary painting – specifically, that he couldn't see the point of painting in the 21st century. While there's nothing particularly new in this, neither in terms of the general sentiment, nor in Ryan saying as much to provoke an audience he knew would likely contain a handful of young painters, in retrospect his 1:1 comment shed some useful light on this bald dismissal of an entire medium. To put as bluntly as Ryan does, a crucial part of *the painterly process* he's missing, or refusing to admit, is precisely the idea that the process (the colon in his ratio) could be more the point than the finished painting – or at least as much.

That's to say, 'painterly' can refer to a *procedure of development* in which *ideas are worked out in realtime* – a notion that's clearly the opposite of Ryan's own way of working's equivalence between idea and result, during which 'nothing really changes'. This painterly platitude of *working-something-out-by-doing* isn't exclusive to painting, of course, nor does it by any means apply to all painting; it is, however, *particularly apparent* in painting due to the medium's surface plasticity. It's relatively easy to imagine paint on canvas having been in its liquid state thanks to the traces of the tools that were used to push it around.

Ryan's statement is also worth contemplating inasmuch as self-reflexivity has itself become something of a medium for him: the meta-reflection in his work is a kind of signature – a trademark or brand, even – in the sense that, say, 'delay' was for Duchamp.

One fairly typical example from 2010 comprises an involuted series of photographic prints that register several degrees of recursion. Each work in the series is based on an apparently arbitrary detail of a familiar (or at least familiar-seeming) Neoplasticist painting – an abstract composition of primary and secondary colours. These source works are drawn from the collection of the Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich that both commissioned and eventually exhibited Ryan's project. The paintings are by Dexel, Lohse, Maatsch, Graeser, and Glarner. Each particular fragment is output as a high-resolution, high-gloss, large-format photographic print – as if output to proof the colour values of an eventual 'proper' reproduction; indeed, the print includes a sample strip of colours used to check the equivalence between original and copy. Then *that* reproduction, colour chart included, is *itself* photographed with the same high-end precision, and *this* second-degree facsimile output as the final 'outer' print, also including its own colour reference (now two-levels removed from the original). In sum, this last print indexes the genealogy of representation across three distinct moments – or four if you count the original painting. All of which sets up a vertiginous riddle: what's matching what, exactly, and in what order, and how, and why?



Each piece in the series consists of two adjacent photographs from the two stages of documentation of a single work, titled by a variation on this template: *Investigation #15 – Although you've given me everything (Glarner)*.[82]

It's easy enough, then, to see this piece as a clinical, mechanical 1:1 realization of an idea in which nothing has changed between idea and iteration. It's a one-liner, a concept sprung ready-resolved from Ryan's mind that, while presumably anticipating the considerable complexities of production involved, is essentially bereft of any sign of contingency met along the way. As such, I consider it a prime example of self-reflexivity *affected* as a trope: an applied knowingness, with all the flavour and intellectual kudos of the meta-vantage, yet lacking vital life (i.e. any trace of that looping 'sociological' cause-and-effect of self-reflection and development noted at the start of this chapter). While certainly *a* reflection, the work doesn't register *the act of* reflection. It's a gesture more noun than verb, a being-word rather than a doing-word, *mise-en-abymism* practiced as sport.[83]

In worrying over tropes and counterposing them with temperaments, I'm hoping that 'trope' suggests some kind of entrenchment or territorialization prone to the forces of fashion with a cultural sell-by date. In his book *The Program Era* (2009), literary critic Marc McGurl calls this worn-out state 'autopoetic', a pun he coins from *autopoiesis*, which means 'self-making'.[84] McGurl is specifically alluding to the 'routinely reflexive operations' of later modernist literature and by implication all rearguard modern art – and it is of course precisely the 'routine' aspect (automatic, habitual, normalized) that turns it into a trope.

Partly to be fair to Ryan, but also to reinforce the bigger point, here's a second instance of his work that I think demonstrates the opposite: a temperamental inverse of the autopoetic trope.

**(b) The exact speed of thinking**

*The Last Work* is a video made in London in the winter of 2007 that comprises a single shot from Ryan's studio in Hoxton to his house in Aldwych, 40 minutes door-to-door.[85] As the camera rolls at

[82] All are similarly numbered 'investigations'; the phrase in the middle stays the same while the proper name changes accordingly.

[83] In fact, this *mise en abyme* became even more abyss-mal the following year, when Ryan further developed the series of pairs by digitally transposing the composite images from the photographic prints to mechanically produced oil 'paintings' on canvas, thus bringing the images back full circle to their original medium. Each new pair was titled *Remember me, mistakenly – Although you've given me everything*.

[84] As derived from the 'perfectly routine (…) self-making activities of the biological organism' and latterly adopted by systems theory to more broadly describe 'the self-referential closure of all systems, biological, social, or otherwise.' See: Marc McGurl, *The Program Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 111–2.

[85] There are a few details that, though more or less extraneous to my point, are worth noting down here: (1) The video was made in advance of a year long sabbatical, hence its title; (2) It's the focal point of a larger installation, back-projected onto a small

walking pace along darkening streets, members of a *verité* crew with conspicuous production gear casually move in and out of shot.



This footage is accompanied by a monotone female voice-over. Given the patently personal (or maybe pseudo-personal) nature of the script, along with the title and other sundry bits of information in the work's peripherals, the voice is patently a stand-in for Ryan himself, i.e. the sound of him absently thinking aloud. As the camera advances along the route, the 'narrator' notes passing details that trigger anecdotes, memories and half-thoughts, variously trailing off or instigating further loose associations. At the same time, these observations cue a series of structuralist visual devices. A second, slightly smaller frame superimposed on top of the initial image, for instance, shows the view from a second camera tracking behind the crew, masking all but the original's outer edges.





As the film continues, references to other media pop up on further embedded frames (e.g. the opening sequence of Julian Schnabel's film *Basquiat*, a recent music video) and form increasingly complex composites as multiple channels play over each other, gradually accumulating before 'resetting' back to a more basic image.

But while the work's heady effects are akin to the multiple levels of reproduction in the *Investigations* series, here the meta-impositions don't seem clever-clever, just clever. Or: the video's self-reflexive giddiness seems less contrived as an aesthetic end in itself, more *called up* by the script true to the ebb and flow of rolling contemplation. Beyond some sort of skeleton script, it seems to me that the piece could only possibly have been made by having being written along the way; or is otherwise such a faithful recollection that it *mentally transports* to the same degree.

In any case, it amounts to a compulsive impression of absent-minded meditation, a lucid daydream that captures the exact speed of thinking. Ryan assembles the conditions to make his mundane strange again, and in the end it's *this* 1:1 relationship – between the world and the work, not the idea and its product – that renders the outcome so plausible. Precisely because *The Last Work* was palpably made-up-as-it-went-along, instead of coolly reflecting on it, we're warmly drawn into its haphazard flow.

screen built into the corner of a specifically-designed room with a white carpet and 'chroma-key' blue walls (as is noted in the voiceover); (3) In a sequel made the following year, *The Last Work Too*, the same journey is filmed in reverse – from home to studio – exactly half a year later on a *summer* morning, while the new audio track consists of a group of schoolchildren singing all the ideas Ryan jotted down in his notebook during the interim. In his own words, the narrative 'attempts to demystify the romanticism around notions of the studio and [artistic] practice'.

## 3.10: COMMUNICATING COMMUNICABILITY

In his book *Means without End* (2000), Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben attributes a very specific meaning to the word 'gesture', which he variously describes as 'the exhibition of a mediality' and 'making a means visible as such'.[86] It's hard to find a decent definition of 'mediality', but it seems to run something along the lines of 'a perceived reality generated by a specific medium'. In less convoluted terms, Agamben's 'gesture' means *to show the way the workings work* – the mechanism as well as its outcome. It's therefore commensurate with the self-reflexivity as described throughout this chapter.

He cites pornography as a case in point. Pornography, he says, comprises 'People caught in the act of performing a gesture [as] a means addressed to the end of giving pleasure to others' – and inasmuch as those filmed or photographed are 'kept suspended in and by their own mediality' they 'become the medium of a new pleasure for the audience'.[87] It is the act of showing a process, generally speaking in order to provoke a particular type of attention or apprehension – a sort of applied empathy. An equivalent gesture in language *communicates its own communicability*.

Elaborating on the definition, Agamben quotes a passage by ancient Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro on the distinction between making and acting. Varro says that while it's possible for a person to write a part in a play but not act it, and equally to act a part in a play they haven't written, the proper sense of gesture involves both at once: making and acting conceived as a single process. The gesture, then, is the natural outcome of the theorizing practitioner, or – to use a marginally less tedious term – the *critical maker*: actor-director, singer-songwriter, poet-performer, writer-designer. Such generalists don't outsource but prefer to publish (in the broadest sense of 'make public') themselves.

Once again this recalls Benjamin's author-as-producer who, by involving himself at the root level of production processes, draws no distinction between the 'micro' and 'macro' aspects of a piece of work and is therefore responsible for the tone of voice or the intricacies of typesetting as much as the channels of dispersion and context of reception. The critical maker embodies what economists call 'vertical integration', where the various elements that make up a product (designing, processing, packaging, distributing) are assimilated under a single umbrella company at one location rather than separated and outsourced to remote specialists. Varro further characterizes the work of this generalist *auteur* type as 'enduring', 'carrying-on' or 'supporting' in the sense of maintaining a tradition.[88] The implication is that by involving himself at the outset, the critical maker inevitably embeds the story of the production process into the formal realization of its object.[89]

Varro then quotes Aristotle who, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, wrote that 'production [*poiesis*] has an end other than itself, but action [*praxis*] does not: good action is itself an end', a sentiment that the Polish polymath Stefan Themerson distilled into a single clause: 'means are of greater importance than aims'.[90]

This pre-empts Agamben's essential point in 'Notes on Gesture', that gestures properly belong to the realm not of aesthetics but of ethics and politics. The compound writing-*and*-acting gesture of the

[86] Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture' [1992, Italian] *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[87] Ibid., p. 58. My italics. This recalls Kant's 'purposiveness without purpose' – his formulation of form that suggests but stops short of fulfilment.

[88] Ibid., p. 58.

[89] More on this in chapter 7.

[90] Themerson made this claim during a lecture in order to then assert that 'decency of means is the aim of aims'. In the broader context of the talk, he was making the political point that force ought not be used to counter force, that wicked means ought not be pitched against other wicked means, even in view of achieving decent ends. For Themerson there are no aims, ends or goals that ought override common decency – no extenuating circumstances or 'states of exception'. In aesthetic terms, his 'common decency' translates as a commitment to clear and honest communication. More on this in §7.5.

critical maker is significant beyond the aesthetic realm, he says, because it connects with the wider world and is socially potent to the extent that it mimics, reveals and so fosters the realization of our *personal* mediality. Otherwise put, by showing the workings of the work, artistic gestures can make apparent the equivalent workings of the social systems we're part of – our position in the scheme of things – and in doing so cultivate a more athletic sense of agency in view of changing that scheme.

In *The Open Work*, Eco maintains that 'form as a way of thinking' is inherently 'political' because by pushing beyond closeted theory and setting up in broad-daylight practice, the critical maker is suddenly answerable: his or her ethical orientation is inevitably inherent – and manifest – in the decisions taken while making the work;[91] attitudes are acted-out, which is to say *lived*. Likewise for Benjamin, where the mere theorist stops short at declaring his sympathy with a political cause, the writer-as-producer manifests a political *tendency* – and work that exhibits the correct tendency 'need show no other quality.' In short, the work projects an ethical or political orientation not by simply claiming but actually embodying it. 'I make it my own', he goes on; 'But in doing so I abstain from asserting it dogmatically. It must be *proved*.'[92] The critical maker denies himself the possibility of pontificating in the abstract.

## 3.11: INCOMPLETE

In *Kant After Duchamp*, De Duve writes that incompleteness is a biological fact of life. We are born premature, he says, meaning literally before our bodies and organs are fully developed. He then adds that this constitutionally unfinished aspect of the human character applies not only to our biological development, but to our cultural sensibility too. In this light, 'Anticipation is not just the desire for prediction and mastery', he says, but a far more intrinsic drive – nothing less than 'the biological duty of mankind!'[93] We are, then, *prenaturally disposed to open-endedness*.

Russell's paradox is a well-known logical conundrum dating from 1901 that derives from the 20th-century analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell's acknowledgement of a flaw in the 19th-century mathematician Georg Cantor's Set Theory. Set Theory is a foundational branch of mathematics concerned with formulating principles of relations among sets of objects. Crudely summarized, in the face of Cantor's unsatisfactory formulation, Russell asserted that any account of containment always presupposes one root-level instance that *cannot itself be contained by that account* (any statement that accounts for 'all other statements', for instance); or to put it in terms of *Naive* Set Theory, which is the technical name for set theory expressed in normal language,

> Any definable collection is a set. Let *R* be the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. If *R* is not a member of itself, then its definition dictates that it must contain itself, and if it contains itself, then it contradicts its own definition as the set of all sets that are not members of themselves.[94]

Formulated at the crux of the modern era, Russell's paradox is a seminal articulation in the fields of mathematics and logic of the same self-consciousness that propelled much modernist art. The paradox has widespread application beyond its founding domain, as it alludes to the impossibility of ever wholly transcending a situation in order to objectively observe it (because the observer is always already inevitably conditioned by that situation). It's the kind of contradiction that comprises

[91] See §1.5.

[92] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', op. cit., p. 221.

[93] De Duve, op. cit. See pp. 366–8.

[94] Adapted from http://www.wikipedia.com/wiki/Russell's_paradox. A well-known 'applied' version is the Barber Paradox: Suppose there exists a barber in a village who shaves *all* those men in the village who do not shave themselves and *only* those men who do not shave themselves; does the barber shave himself or not?

simultaneous sense and nonsense, of the sort that also characterizes recursive semantics like 'All statements are false' and looks something like an Escher tableau.

Russell made no attempt to resolve his containment paradox in the (therefore non-encyclopaedic) encyclopaedia of axioms *Principia Mathematica*, which he co-authored with A.N. Whitehead a decade later (1910–13). A number of other mathematicians did, but their theories were only consistent within specifically circumscribed limits – which kind of misses the point. Then in 1931, the Austrian academic Kurt Gödel published two 'incompleteness' theorems. These are categorically open-ended proofs that basically claim containment to be both possible and not possible, without formal contradiction:

1. If the system is consistent, it cannot be complete.
2. The consistency of the axioms cannot be proven within the system.

The point is: there's always an exception to the rule. What does this have to do with art?

Gödel's 'incomplete' resolution is congruent with the 'insoluble dialectic' – or *fait accompli* – of social alienation described by Eco in *The Open Work* (discussed in §1.5(a)) whereby individuals are compelled to participate in social systems despite the fact that those systems frequently seem to work against their personal desires and interests. By extension, it is also commensurate with Eco's equivalent 'insoluble dialectic' of aesthetic work (discussed in §1.5(b)), in which artists are bound to work with existing conventions despite the fact that those conventions are inevitably headed for artistic impotence.[95] Recall how Eco expresses this latter truism in terms very close to Russell's conundrum: 'It is impossible to describe a situation by means of a language that is not itself expressed by that situation'; and that Eco proceeds to argue that the realization of this paradox ought not be perceived as a dead-end but an affirmation. The very *apprehension and acceptance* of the condition, says Eco, fosters a conscious, enlightened way of working rather than an ignorant, deluded one.[96]

What can we extrapolate from all this? That in terms of both society at large and art in particular, the *realization* that our situation is fundamentally open and incomplete is a better means of proceeding than banging one's head against the fundamentally futile goal of absolute or axiomatic ends.

While this *sounds* plausible enough, it's not easy to push on and account for the specific *benefits* of this realization beyond the vague 'movement' I've been claiming it cultivates. Fortunately, my pragmatic colleague David Reinfurt nailed a more convincing explanation in this most un-axiomatic of axioms: *Truth must always be produced (through practice) and never simply discovered.*[97]

He said this in a talk that was eventually turned into a piece of writing called, as it happens, 'Naive Set Theory' – so named at least in part because David was unabashedly performing his own 'naive' (i.e. amateur) understanding of actual Set Theory (he had just enough of a grasp of the subject, he assured the audience, to be able to convey it to an equally lay crowd). But then he did this mainly by relating it to other subjects, *which is precisely what the talk was about* – hence the title's 'naivety' equally alludes to the propelling action of ignorance, enthusiasm and good humour. In sum, he articulated a set (fixed) theory about the benefits of a naive (loose) practice.

He further noted that *the ongoing attempt to understand is entirely productive*. It's commonplace to say that it's useful to work in view of a nominal goal and within defined limits. But it's *equally* productive to proceed 'naively', blindly, open-minded and supple enough to modify a course of action as a situation develops; otherwise, you're in danger of force-fitting ideas into forms unsuited to them.

[95] See §1.5.

[96] See chapter 1, fn. 35.

[97] David Reinfurt, 'Naive Set Theory', op. cit., p. 113.

This is the sort of 'ethical orientation' or 'political tendency' that gets inscribed in the 'gestural' work of the critical maker. The push and pull of freedom and order during the making of a piece of work is manifest in the final product, which can then model an equivalent push and pull at the level of social arrangements. Such work can be thus conceived as a tool for thinking about and around equivalent subjects. It can never have 'social impact' in any immediate or obvious sense; at best it can convey an ethical approach to aesthetic work that potentially influences equivalent social attitudes. Certainly, this social effect is relatively subtle, delayed or ambient (and likely beyond verification or measure), hence the focus in this thesis on intentions over outcomes. This is not to make a case for, say, 'artists who write', or more generally 'plainly articulate practitioners'; only to assert that art seems more answerable and so more *substantial* when measured against an explicit set of intentions. Work otherwise seems arbitrary, to neither address nor answer to anything worldly.

Finally, for now, I'd like to draw out the connection between David's summary insight and the nature of self-reflexive art I've been concerned with here. First I'll emphasize one more time that I've considered the topic at length not in order to make a case for self-reflexive art per se, but solely in view of its purposiveness as a model ('a mode of address, of attitude and approach, rather than outcome or consequence'[98]): a pending product as a talking point on the way to something else, then happily discarded like Wittgenstein's ladder.

Plainly I'm paranoid about seeming to be rooting for self-reflexivity. This unease is germane to the link between incompleteness and self-reflexivity. Here's why:

Human consciousness naturally reaches beyond itself. As time passes we become increasingly aware – on both personal/subjective and historical/objective levels – of our environment, culture, self, and so on, and (theoretically, at least) are capable of contemplating it all with gathering sophistication. Up to a point this is consonant with Hegel's teleology of dialectical progression towards 'universal consciousness'. Hegel's metaphysics is no longer plausible to contemporary minds because his notion of an absolute end – the realization of the 'universal spirit' – has surely been superseded itself. As already noted, 'absolute' ideas are not nearly as credible as they used to be. We've effectively transcended Hegel's own ideas according to the apparently unforeseen logic of his own philosophy (a Hegelianism that transcends *Hegel*'s Hegelianism, you might say). As also noted above, contemporary consciousness is more at home with the idea that existence consists in relativity, chaos, indeterminacy, and contingency; incessant change and uncertainty as a rule. (*The only rule is: there are no rules*.) As such, any credible progressive or constructive disposition today must necessarily accept and properly align itself with this condition – perpetually in progress, under construction, forever pending, and so on and so on.

Likewise, we can perceive readily enough how, historically, art has become increasingly conscious *of itself as a discipline*. 20th century art follows a trajectory of mounting self-awareness. However, as noted in §3.5, this self-consciousness advances *with equally growing awareness* that the critical spirit that has driven such movements doesn't necessarily have much actual, tangible affect on the subject under scrutiny. At best it maybe mirrors it. The assumption that self-reflexive art is in some concrete sense *productively* critical is dubious at best; as an actual critical force today it's more plausibly 'redundant' or 'superfluous'. As one bystander noted: 'Must [we] consult some picture or trinket to understand that identity is administered, power exploits, resistance is predetermined, all is shit?'[99]

And yet I don't mean to make a wholly antithetical case *against* self-reflexivity either, only to note its limits – which are precisely akin to those shortcomings of Set Theory. In sum, contemporary consciousness acknowledges the necessity of goals and limits all the while aware of the pitfalls of approaching the world in terms of ends and absolutes. It acknowledges, too, the need to adapt in the face of contingencies along the way.

[98] Potter, *Models & Constructs*, op. cit. p. 35.

[99] Seth Price, 'Dispersion', op. cit. (unpaginated). An alternate version of this line in a different version of the piece reads: 'In any case, must I consult art to understand that identity is administered, power exploits, resistance is predetermined, all is hollow?'

The ideal is to work in a state of pointed flexibility, and self-reflexive art is a means of taunting thought in view of this exemplary disposition. It's an awareness-tool.[100]

[100] This is what Will Holder was talking about in the reference to Bishop Berkeley mentioned during the back and forth of §3.2. The extended reference is to a dog called Berkeley in Stefan Themerson's novel *Cardinal Pölätüo* who incessantly chases a bow attached to his tail. Will was acknowledging Themerson's use of Berkeley as a metaphor for a self-consciousness (or a theoretical approach) that similarly 'chases its own tail' and so needs application (function, practice) to break the loop, in order that such application sets off new loops of thinking (new connections, new ideas). See: Stefan Themerson, *Cardinal Pölätüo* (London: Gaberbocchus, 1961).



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – 4 MARCH 2008

As the first of a series of reflections on the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Dexter Sinister has staged a rotating spotlight near the entrance to the 7th Regiment Armory building (Park Avenue at 67th Street), marking the parallel site of the exhibition. This will be present during the opening nights of Tuesday 4 March and Wednesday 5 March only, operating from 7pm onwards.

Following the detailed proposal described by Margaret Wertheim of the Institute for Figuring in her New York Times Op-Ed piece of Wednesday 20 June 2007 (overleaf), this klieg light will cast a giant shadow into the New York City sky. To quote:

It's quite easy to conjure
A faster-than-light shadow
(Or in theory, at least):
Build a great klieg light,
A superstrong version
Of the ones at the Academy Awards.
Now paste a piece of black paper
Onto the klieg's glass
So there's a shadow in the middle of the beam.

(In this case, the shadow image will be formed by the inverted Whitney graphic (above) adhered to the surface of the light.)

During the following three weeks (4 March – 23 March) while the Armory building operates as an auxillary location for the exhibition, Dexter Sinister will continue to produce and release a number of commissioned 'texts' by various co-operators in various media.



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – 4 MARCH 2008

As the first of a series of reflections on the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Dexter Sinister has staged a rotating spotlight near the entrance to the Whitney Museum of Art (Madison Avenue at 75th Street), marking the parallel site of the exhibition. This will be present during the opening nights of Tuesday 4 March and Wednesday 5 March only, operating from 7pm onwards.

Following the detailed proposal described by Margaret Wertheim of the Institute for Figuring in her New York Times Op-Ed piece of Wednesday 20 June 2007 (overleaf), this klieg light will cast a giant shadow into the New York City sky. To quote:

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# 4: VARIOUS TRUE MIRRORS

This second practice chapter recounts an unusually long chain-link of projects gathered under the title *True Mirror*. A certain amount of preamble is necessary for the trajectory to make sense.

## 4.1: JUST IN TIME

Dexter Sinister, which means Right & Left in the language of heraldry, was supposed to be the name of a publishing imprint due to operate under the auspices of the 2006 Manifesta Biennial in Nicosia, Cyprus. The curators that year were planning to break from the usual biennial format (i.e. turn a city into an art capital for a month or two) by setting up an art school on the island. This would be an emphatically speculative school designed to reflect on past, present and future models of art education, with the possibility of eventually turning it into a permanent institution.

After a year or so of preparations the entire project was abruptly terminated for ostensibly political reasons, rooted in the fact that both Cyprus as a whole and Nicosia in particular are split along a Greek/Turkish divide, marked by a no-man's land and policed by the United Nations.[1] Before the whole thing collapsed, David Reinfurt and I had planned to set up a workshop responsible for designing and dispersing all communication materials as and when required by the nascent school; an in-house publishing department that, as well as simply handling the school's immediate needs, would serve to document the overall project as it progressed, and archive it afterwards. We resolved to use whatever technologies we could beg, borrow or otherwise scavenge locally (whether mimeograph machine or MacBook Pro) and operate according to a Just-In-Time model of economic production.

Famously implemented by the Toyota Corporation in the 1950s, counter to the prevailing model of the rigid Fordist assembly line, the J-I-T approach is comparatively fluid, flexible and reflexive. It aims to reduce costs and so maximize profits, partly by more efficiently utilizing its workforce (more all-round skills, more latitude for employees to move between different aspects of production, and more responsibility generally), and partly by avoiding storage costs by manufacturing products as and when required. For our purposes at least, J-I-T could be considered the more progressive, 'free-thinking' of the two. In consecutive proposals to the curators and bits of auxiliary writing about and around our ideas in the initial stages of the project, we proposed to set up a project that would consider of the state of contemporary art, education and publishing in view of these contrasting production models.



We intended this workshop to be fully visible and publicly accessible in a shop front with full-height windows on a corner of Nicosia's old town, on display as a 'gestural' work in the biennial while simultaneously operating as a practical arm of the school – a secretary's office in a vitrine. The name's right and left (brain or hand) became the basis of the school's badge, the rudimentary form of which was inspired by an idea recalled from an essay by Steve Rushton in an early issue of *Dot Dot Dot*, 'Sinister/Bastard: interchangeable paragraphs on a typographical sign'.[2] Here's one of those paragraphs:

[1] For more on the project's collapse, see: Martin Herbert, 'School's Out', *Frieze*, no. 101, September 2006.

[2] Steve Rushton, 'Sinister/Bastard: interchangeable paragraphs on a typographical sign', *Dot Dot Dot* #4, 2002. The piece is so prescient to my thesis that it's tempting to quote the entire thing, but I'll limit myself to one more paragraph: 'But what about the monsters it produces – these interdisciplinary chimeras with the head of an administrator, the hands of an artist and the body of a

> The oblique stroke appears at first sight to be the signal that the binary opposition between categories (speech/writing or love/hate) won't hold – that neither of the words in opposition to each other is good for the fight. The stroke, like an over-vigilant referee, must keep them apart and yet still oversee the match. The stroke highlights the inadequacy of each word. Just when we think we have a word that seems up to the task of describing a thing, it obscures the thing it is describing. This sets up (you know the old story) a chain of signifiers, re-establishing the 'metaphysics of presence'. The oblique stroke emphasizes difference but implies possibility. It excites the words on either side of the stroke into motion toward each other and yet divides them irrevocably.

Elsewhere in the piece, Steve pictures the forward slash 'swinging like a catflap between one category and another. Flicking rapidly from the diagonal to the vertical, to the reverse diagonal, allowing passage for the meaning of words.'

We managed to squeeze out one publication, *Notes for an Art School*, a few months before the whole project fell through.[3] This was a collection of newly commissioned essays published in tandem with a weekend conference held on the island in anticipation of the main event. The book was an opportunity to try out what we were hoping to occur in our anticipated workshop, i.e. that whatever technologies we happened to gather in the course of setting up a cheap, efficient office would emphatically dictate and mark the form of each new piece of work. Hence this pilot publication was made using a fairly eccentric print technology, a Risograph stencil-printing machine belonging to a community centre in The Netherlands we'd worked with before.[4] The relatively severe limitations of this machine leave fairly visible marks on its products (in terms of format, paper, colours, margins, etc.) – particularly if that product is knowingly designed to make the most of its idiosyncrasies. The book was thus conceived as a kind of demonstrator – of this particular mode of production, certainly, but equally emblematic of our intentions for the Nicosia project as a whole.

Although the book turned out to be the only official trace of Manifesta 6, many of the school's proposed departments played out later in other locations and situations.[5] Dexter Sinister was part of this diaspora, too: we transplanted the ideas developed for Nicosia – and the badge – to a basement space we began to lease around the same time on New York's Lower East Side.



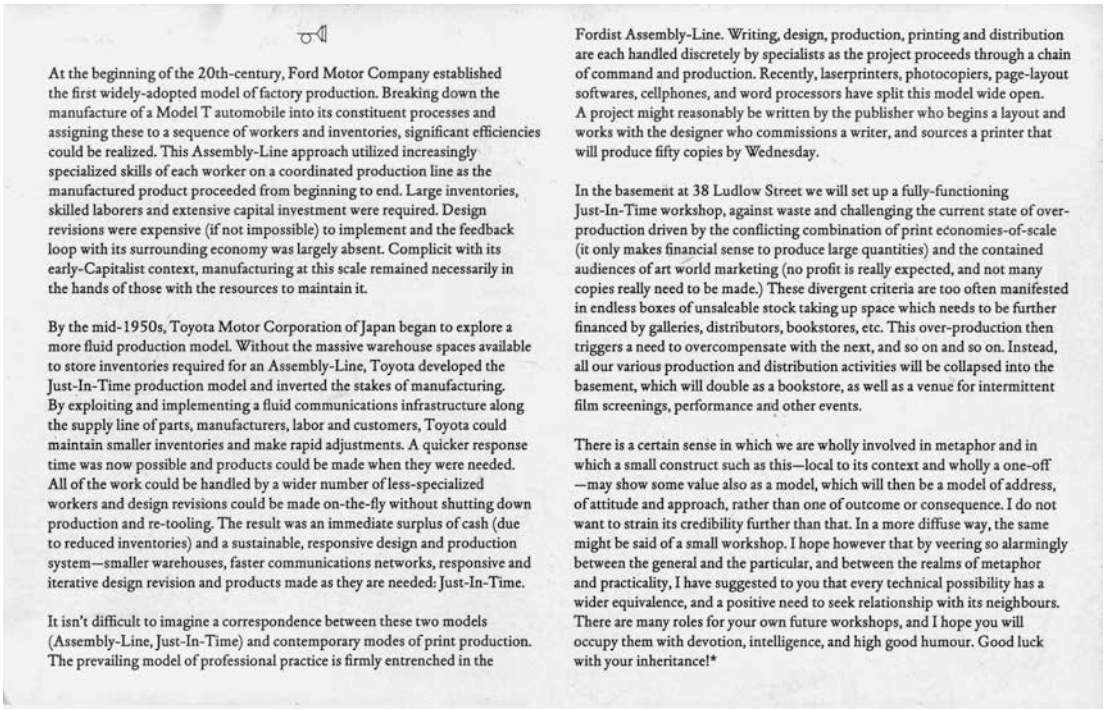

sumo wrestler? Part theorist, part editor, part curator, part designer? And could there be points of division where a distinction can be made even between inter-disciplines? Is it possible that an as-yet undeclared infra-slim specialisation may exist in the diagonal line between puppeteer and weightlifter? And deep in the blackness of the stroke is there another stroke?'

[3] Mai Abu ElDahab, Anton Vidokle, Florian Waldvogel, eds., *Notes for an Art School* (Nicosia: Dexter Sinister, 2008).

[4] These machines, the printed effect of which falls somewhere between photocopy and silkscreen, have since become fairly ubiquitous at the entrepreneurial-literary end of the design scene.

[5] For example, the Berlin bar/seminar room unitednationsplaza organized by one of the Manifesta 6 curators, Anton Vidokle; or Objectif Exhibitions, an independent space in Antwerp directed for a while by another, Mai Abu ElDahab.

Transposed from the relative backwater of Nicosia to the locus of Western capitalism, this new 'workshop' became involved in selling as much as manufacturing. To this end, we opened a modest bookstore,[6] initially with the idea of dispersing various publications we were involved in producing, while cutting out as many middlemen (publishers, distributors) as possible. The shop included *Notes for An Art School*, as well as a bootleg internet-produced Print-on-Demand edition when the original sold out, plus sundry publications made by close colleagues. We launched the space with this summary statement of intent based on our thinking through those two economic models relative to publishing:



At the beginning of the 20th-century, Ford Motor Company established the first widely-adopted model of factory production. Breaking down the manufacture of a Model T automobile into its constituent processes and assigning these to a sequence of workers and inventories, significant efficiencies could be realized. This Assembly-Line approach utilized increasingly specialized skills of each worker on a coordinated production line as the manufactured product proceeded from beginning to end. Large inventories, skilled laborers and extensive capital investment were required. Design revisions were expensive (if not impossible) to implement and the feedback loop with its surrounding economy was largely absent. Complicit with its early-Capitalist context, manufacturing at this scale remained necessarily in the hands of those with the resources to maintain it.

By the mid-1950s, Toyota Motor Corporation of Japan began to explore a more fluid production model. Without the massive warehouse spaces available to store inventories required for an Assembly-Line, Toyota developed the Just-In-Time production model and inverted the stakes of manufacturing. By exploiting and implementing a fluid communications infrastructure along the supply line of parts, manufacturers, labor and customers, Toyota could maintain smaller inventories and make rapid adjustments. A quicker response time was now possible and products could be made when they were needed. All of the work could be handled by a wider number of less-specialized workers and design revisions could be made on-the-fly without shutting down production and re-tooling. The result was an immediate surplus of cash (due to reduced inventories) and a sustainable, responsive design and production system—smaller warehouses, faster communications networks, responsive and iterative design revision and products made as they are needed: Just-In-Time.

It isn't difficult to imagine a correspondence between these two models (Assembly-Line, Just-In-Time) and contemporary modes of print production. The prevailing model of professional practice is firmly entrenched in the Fordist Assembly-Line. Writing, design, production, printing and distribution are each handled discretely by specialists as the project proceeds through a chain of command and production. Recently, laserprinters, photocopiers, page-layout softwares, cellphones, and word processors have split this model wide open. A project might reasonably be written by the publisher who begins a layout and works with the designer who commissions a writer, and sources a printer that will produce fifty copies by Wednesday.

In the basement at 38 Ludlow Street we will set up a fully-functioning Just-In-Time workshop, against waste and challenging the current state of over-production driven by the conflicting combination of print economies-of-scale (it only makes financial sense to produce large quantities) and the contained audiences of art world marketing (no profit is really expected, and not many copies really need to be made.) These divergent criteria are too often manifested in endless boxes of unsaleable stock taking up space which needs to be further financed by galleries, distributors, bookstores, etc. This over-production then triggers a need to overcompensate with the next, and so on and so on. Instead, all our various production and distribution activities will be collapsed into the basement, which will double as a bookstore, as well as a venue for intermittent film screenings, performance and other events.

There is a certain sense in which we are wholly involved in metaphor and in which a small construct such as this—local to its context and wholly a one-off—may show some value also as a model, which will then be a model of address, of attitude and approach, rather than one of outcome or consequence. I do not want to strain its credibility further than that. In a more diffuse way, the same might be said of a small workshop. I hope however that by veering so alarmingly between the general and the particular, and between the realms of metaphor and practicality, I have suggested to you that every technical possibility has a wider equivalence, and a positive need to seek relationship with its neighbours. There are many roles for your own future workshops, and I hope you will occupy them with devotion, intelligence, and high good humour. Good luck with your inheritance!*

In due course we also stocked a wider range of books, including a modest range of related fiction, but wound this down when we found ourselves spending more time running the shop than making things to put in it. For a time the shop surprisingly subsidized the rent of the space, and it remains today a means of circulating our own *Dot Dot Dot* (and later *Bulletins of The Serving Library*) outside the usual sluggish, costly channels.

## 4.2: PROOF OF THE FACT THAT A MECHANICAL DEVICE CAN REPRODUCE PERSONALITY

About a year after the Manifesta breakdown, we were vaguely invited to participate in the 2007 Whitney Biennial; 'vaguely' inasmuch as the invitation was very ambiguous. The curators eventually floated three possibilities: we could design the catalogue; contribute an autonomous section to a catalogue designed by someone else; or participate directly in the biennial alongside the other exhibiting artists. We opted for the last, as it seemed the furthest from a foregone conclusion and so likely the most fertile. Like the curators, though, we had no idea what form this participation might take, nor any obvious precedent to work from.

We'd loosely set up Dexter Sinister to explore publishing in its most exploded sense; that is, to query what present and future publishing might involve beyond the established ways and means. To the

[6] The early days of the Dexter Sinister basement are variously documented in: Anthony Huberman, 'Out of Circulation', *Artforum* (April 2007); Peter Nesbitt, 'Who is Dexter Sinister?', *Art on Paper* (March/April 2007); Edward Lovett, 'This Year's Model', *Print* (July/August 2007); and Adam Kleinman, 'Dexter Sinister', http://www.bombmagazine.org/article/3117/dexter-sinister.

extent that we could articulate it at that time, this meant not only exploring the possibilities afforded by new technologies (circulating texts via URLs or downloadable PDFs, to take two obvious examples), but equally that an event – a book launch or music performance, for instance – might be considered as much a form of publication as a material artefact like a book, magazine, or their immediate immaterial equivalents. And so it made sense to steer the Whitney's invitation in this direction too.

Above all, we were keen to address the specific character of this particular biennial, i.e. a relatively glamorous, much-discussed, well-attended, often easily-criticized but generally well-regarded survey of contemporary American art in the heart of a media-saturated art capital that, as such, is characterized by the sort of self-aggrandizing hype common to New York specifically and art biennials generally. The Whitney Biennial typically receives a substantial amount of press, often compressed into a binary verdict – a requisite yes/no, good/bad, rich/poor, timely/untimely, relevant/irrelevant, better-than/worse-than the last one.

With this in mind, we wondered how we might assemble a set of circumstances to foster the opposite, i.e. to complicate or otherwise slow down the show's reception. Thought out in more concrete terms, we gradually conceived of producing some kind of parallel publicity that, although released from within the Biennial (and by extension its umbrella institution, the Whitney Museum of American Art), would circumvent its official sanction. In other words, we would set up some kind of parallel circuit of Public Relations. An obvious point of reference was the ubiquitous Press Release, although we were far less interested in its typical forms (sheet of paper, fax, email, website) than its typical *functions* (to advertise, inform, seduce, entertain). Moreover, we were drawn to the fact that the Press Release is a medium that rigidly emanates from within an institution before haphazardly circulating outside it, variously repeated verbatim, paraphrased or cannibalized into soundbites. In short, the nature of the Press Release is to become increasingly tenuous, vulnerable and prone to distortion the further it moves (in both time and space) from its source.

Our continued thinking yielded a fairly rudimentary set of metaphors: mirrors, reflections, shadows, gaps and doubles. When it came time to gather these free-floating notions into a concrete proposal (or at least stall for more time to do so), it seemed most expedient to make some kind of repository document to contain the disparate texts and images we'd assembled in the basement since beginning to reflect on the subject. We figured the form of this 'bank' would likely anticipate – and perhaps summon – our as-yet-unrealized intentions. So, although this inaugural offering was nominally addressed to the curators, it was as much if not more a means of making manifest to *ourselves* an outcome we hadn't quite yet seen.

As it happened, this 'repository' morphed into the first of three preparatory documents that served this purpose – congealing, oddly enough, into a long poem built from fragments of found prose. These excerpts were often compressed or otherwise retooled, and all referenced via a set of thumbnail image 'endnotes'. This was precisely as lucid as we could get regarding our intentions at the time; and so we arranged to meet the curators and recite this poem-proposal:

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*                              TRUE MIRROR                                *



The first poem was the title poem.                                        1
This time Corinne read it aloud, but she still didn't hear it.
She read it through a third time and heard some of it.
She read it through a fourth time, and heard all of it.
It was a poem containing the lines:

        Not wasteland, but a great inverted forest
        with all foliage underground

As though it might be best to look immediately for shelter,
Corinne had to put the book down.
At any moment the apartment building seemed liable to lose               10
Its balance and topple across Fifth Avenue into Central Park.

She waited.
Gradually the deluge of truth and beauty abated.

Then New Years Eve of 2007 came:
We celebrated it with friends at a party
Where everybody was asked to wear
Exactly what they wore exactly one year before.

But all at once it dawned on me that this
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream                          20
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game,
Plexed artistry, and something of the same
Pleasure in it as they who played it found.

They were made with an idea of seeing
Two realms at once. "Two games, yours and
The verso, an additional waiting to be played                            30
In another time, another space."
A mirrored world, an unheralded parallel present.

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It's an odd masterpiece,
A celebration of the River Rouge auto plant,
Which had succeeded the Highland Park factory
As Ford's industrial headquarters,
Painted by a Communist
For the son of a Capitalist
The north and south walls are devoted
To nearly life-size scenes in which                                    40
The plant's grey gears, belts, racks and workbenches
Surge and swarm like some vast intestinal apparatus.
The workers within might be subsidiary organs
Or might be lunch
As the whole churns to excrete a stream of black Fords.

Five Tyres abandoned and Five Tyres remoulded.
Proof of the fact that a mechanical device can
Reproduce personality
And that Quality is merely
The distribution aspect of Quantity.                                   50

Journalists have conquered the book form;
Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual;
The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers,
but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers,
but distributors.

The result is rapid turnover,
the regime of the best seller
But there will always be
A parallel circuit, a black market.

Being new is, in fact, often understood as                             60
A combination of being different
And being recently-produced.
We call a car a new car if this car is different from other cars,
and at the same time the latest, most recent model.

But to be new is by no means the same as being different.
The new is a difference without difference,
Or a difference beyond difference,
A difference which we are unable to recognise.

For Kierkegaard, therefore,
The only medium for a possible emergence of the new                    70
Is the ordinary, the "non-different", the identical --
Not the other, but the same.
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Around the same time,
He mailed fifty postcards to friends and acquaintances
Showing two Boettis hand in hand, like twin brothers,
Defining and simultaneously nullifying a fictitious symbol,
An opposition that is not negated but transformed.

The 'e' -- the 'and' -- which Boetti placed
Between his Christian name and his given,
Indicated the multiplicity within the self,                          80
Was a symbol of the distinction and difference
Between his two personas,
As well as their reprocity, conjunction and interdependence,
Marking a plus-one as well as a division:
A paradox at his very heart.

It is a matter of outwardly reflecting contact-lenses,
Which blind the one who wears them.
The contact-zone is not a filter:
The reflection is print, the senses are linked up.
To upset my own eyes                                                 90
From the reviews:

        What worries many critics most is the fact
        That art seems to be alive and well,
        Not so much because of them
        But in spite of them.

And what do you do?
You just SIT there.

This kind of problem might have been posed by anyone since
Piero della Francesco
And its solution can be precisely foreseen.                         100
Anticipated by Joyce's repeated, sardonic reference to
Dublin as Doublin'
A city marinated in narrative, and inescapably bound up with
Narrative's capability for reflection and duplicity.

It's not just a palindrome in a literal sense,
But also a physical one.
You can actually put a mirror in the middle of it
And it still reads the same.
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Every mathematician agrees that
Every mathematician must know some                                    110
Set theory.
We have proved, in other words, that
        Nothing contains everything.
Or more spectacularly,
        There is no universe

The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be
The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be

Tattarrattat!
A Sun on USA!

Weightless and without energy,                                        120
Shadows still convey information
But the shadow's location cannot be detected until the light,
Moving at its ponderous relativistic pace, arrives.

It's quite easy to conjure
A faster-than-light shadow
(Or in theory, at least):
Build a great klieg light,
A superstrong version
Of the ones at the Academy Awards.
Now paste a piece of black paper                                      130
Onto the klieg's glass
So there's a shadow in the middle of the beam.
Like the signal that summons Batman
We will mount our light in space and
Broadcast the Bat-call to the cosmos.

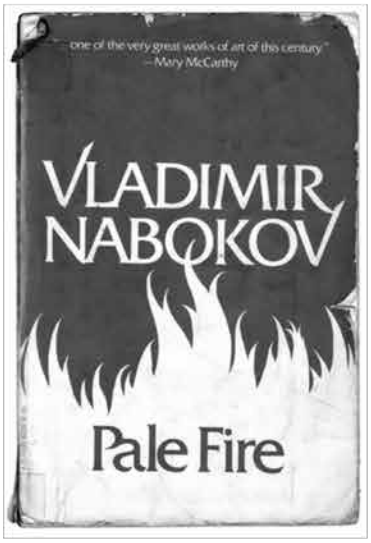
And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:
Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass
Hang all the furniture above the grass,                               140
And how delightful when a fall of snow
Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so
As to make chair and bed exactly stand
Upon that snow, out in that crystal land!
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SOURCES

LINES 1–13 : J.D. Salinger, "The Inverted Forest", *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, 1947



LINES 14–17 : Email from Raimundas Malašauskas, Friday June 15, 2007
LINES 18–27 : Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 1962



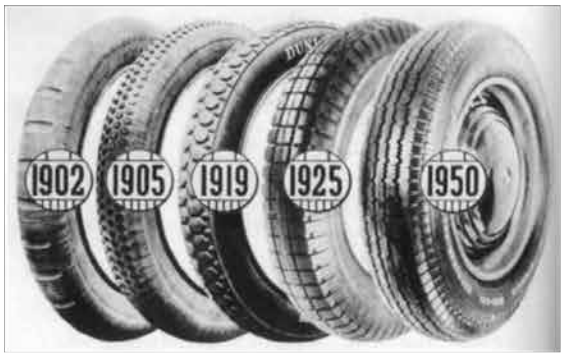

LINES 28–32 : Ryan Gander, *Parallel Cards*, 2006

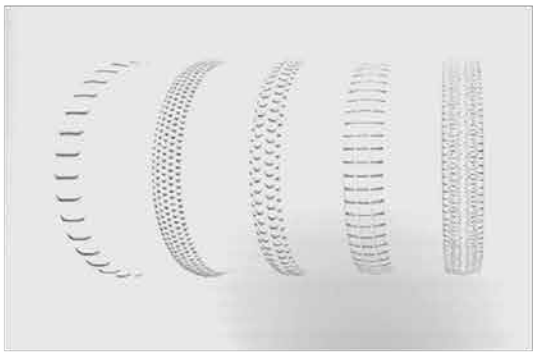



LINES 33–45 : Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia", *Harper's Magazine*, June 2007



LINE 46 : Richard Hamilton, *Five Tyres abandoned, 1964, Five Tyres remoulded*, 1971



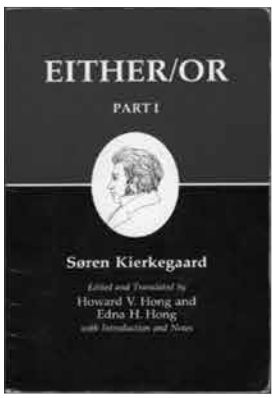
LINES 47–50 : Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 1947



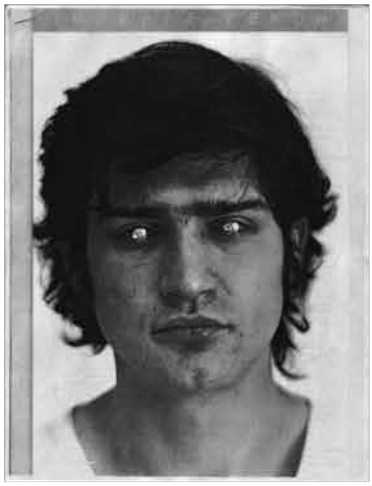
LINES 51–59 : Gilles Deleuze, "L'abécédaire", 1988



LINES 60–72 : Boris Groys paraphrasing Søren Kierkergaard, *On The New*, 2002



LINES 73–85 : Bettina Funcke, "Urgency", Continuous Project #8, 2007
LINES 86–90 : Giuseppe Penone, "To Upset My Own Eyes", *Exhibition catalog for Trees Eyes Hairs Walls Vases*, 1970



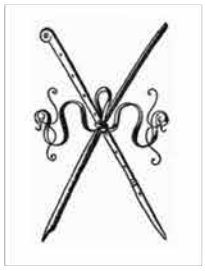
LINE 91 : Paul R. Halmos, *Naive Set Theory*, 1960
LINES 92–95 : Alex Klein, "Critical Responses to the 2002 Whitney Biennial", *The Blow Up*, 2002







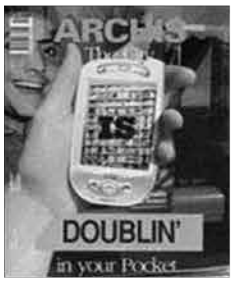
LINES 96–97 : Michael Bracewell, "A Prose Kinema, Some notes for Pale Carnage", Arnolfini, Bristol, 2007



LINES 98–100 : Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words*, 1982



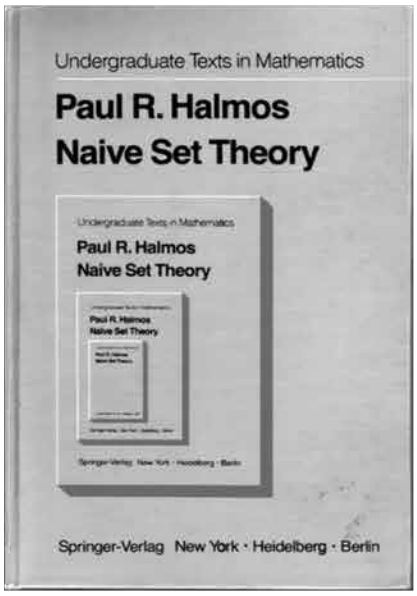
LINES 101–104 : William J. Mitchell, "Electronic Doublin", *Archis 2*, 2002



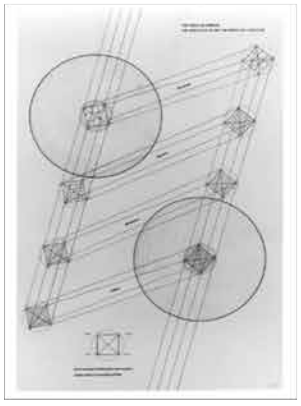

LINES 105–108 : Ryan Gander, "Little Bastard", *Dot Dot Dot 12*, 2006



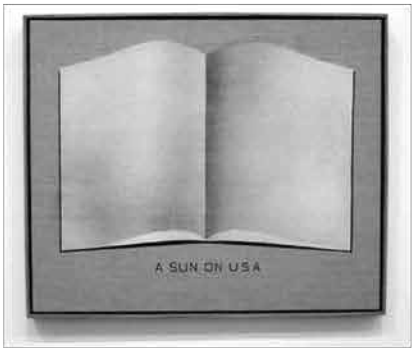

LINES 109–115 : Paul R. Halmos, *Naive Set Theory*, 1960




LINES 116–117 : Stephan Willats, *The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be*, 2006



LINE 118 : James Joyce, *Ulysses,* 1922
LINE 119 : Ed Ruscha, *A Sun on USA,* 2002




LINES 120–135 : Margaret Wertheim, "The Shadow Goes", *New York Times Op-Ed*, Wednesday June 20, 2007



The Shadow Goes

By Margaret Wertheim

The shade cast by the solstice can go faster than light.

LINES 136–143 : Vladimir Nabakov, *Pale Fire*, 1962



If a reader mentally squints, the net effect of this repository ought to evoke our broad thematic territory – the 'parallel circuits' and 'black markets' of distribution. It's a kind of sideways advance, or an advance in abeyance, consonant with Eco's description (quoted already in chapter 1) that

> the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear.[7]

As noted, the poem (or more accurately, the fragments of prose assembled into the stereotypical form of a poem) that makes up the first half of the document is annotated by a sequence of 'mirror' images in the second that refer to the sources of the writing we'd borrowed and butchered. These images weren't included merely as a graphic counterpoint, but also to show that each verbal idea has a visual counterpart (logotype, book cover, photograph, and so on). This in turn suggests that any so-called textual 'releases' we might contrive for the Whitney would similarly presuppose their own unique formal carrier, as specific and diverse as the 'press' they would transmit – and that could conceivably be an equal or greater part of the message being 'released' …

Take the first annotation to lines 1 through 13, cut and pasted from a long short story by J.D. Salinger, then reconstituted as a stanza. The story is titled *The Inverted Forest*, after these lines from a poem by the story's protagonist:

> Not wasteland, but a great inverted forest
> With all foliage underground

This disorienting image serves as an inaugural emblem for the Whitney project. Not untypically for Salinger, his fictional poet Ray Ford is both a sage and a prodigy, yet these two lines are the only evidence of his work. The entire premise of Ford's genius (and so the story's plausibility) hinges on the promise of this pregnant couplet. Transposed to the context of our incubating Whitney idea, the same lines flag an equivalent promise to 'invert' the museum's media, and the corresponding graphic 'annotation' is a flatly literal translation of this intention: the museum's Brutalist logotype flipped and mirrored, less immediately inverted-looking than vaguely alien, perhaps Cyrillic, yet iconic enough to remain recognizable on first glance.

The poem's other images include a number of germane book and magazine covers, plus a few artworks that likewise abbreviate our thoughts-in-progress. They include:

– Ryan Gander's *Parallel Cards* (2007), a set of playing cards with the suites printed on both sides yet without corresponding backs and fronts, so when a regular game is played using one side of the set, an irrational 'parallel' one occurs on the reverse;

– Rodney Graham's oddly spectacular upside-down photograph *Main Street Tree* (2006);

– Richard Hamilton's *Five Tyres Abandoned* (1963) and *Five Tyres Remoulded* (1971), twin iterations of an exercise in extreme perspective, the original drawing scrapped when it proved too difficult for human rendering, then realized eight years later once computer technology was developed enough to plot it mechanically;

– Ed Ruscha's *A Sun on USA* (2002), one in a series of palindromic drawings, in which each reversible phrase is set underneath a blank Platonic book spread;

– Stephen Willatts's proto-utopian schematic plotting of *The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be* (2006);

[7] Eco, op. cit., p. 157.

– and Giuseppe Penone's *Rovesciare I propri occhi* (*To Reverse One's Own Eyes*, 1970), a well-known photographic self-portrait of the artist wearing mirrored contact lenses that project not only his own gaze back on itself, but, by implication, also that of the viewer – by proxy of the camera – back at him or her too.

The last image shows the origin of the poem's title. 'True Mirror' is the name of a very particular mirror first patented in 1887, yet (so far as we could ascertain) designed and manufactured only since 1992 by a company of the same name that at the time of the Whitney project was based in Brooklyn. This is their logo:



Unlike a regular mirror, which inverts – 'mirrors' – the viewer's true image (i.e. you see the left side of your face on the right side of the reflecting surface), a True Mirror provides an actual reflection (i.e. the real and reflected left now correspond).[8] We first came across one in 2005, in the bathroom of a mediocre bar called The Pink Pony, a few blocks north of Dexter Sinister. Three years later, both the nature and name of the device suddenly seemed very propitious, given that the project was shaping up to 'reflect' (truly or not) on the institution itself. Next, we invited a number of our regular collaborators, plus a few relevant strangers, to contribute articles, opinions, essays and other 'reflections'; and also planned to circumscribe those responses to the biennial by the orthodox media, i.e. newspapers, magazines, websites and blogs. Ultimately, we wanted to 'reflect' and 'reflect on' the show's audience by manipulating its prejudices and expectations – and provoke them to do the same.

To recap: at this point the idea was to slow down or complicate the reception of the Whitney Biennial by manipulating the sort of PR that tends to foster pre-digested, clichéd, bland or cynical readings, in view of opening up more thoughtful, expansive or idiosyncratic ones.

When we met the curators at The Pink Pony to read them the poem, it turned out they knew all about the bathroom and its funny mirror ('that's why we never come here') – and had guessed this had something to do with what we were about to suggest. This seemed auspicious enough already, so we just handed over the poem and left.

## 4.3: MESSAGE-SIGNAL-NOISE-CHANNEL

Unusually, the main body of the 2008 Biennial was to be augmented by an off-site program for the first three weeks at the Park Avenue Seventh Regiment Armory building, one of the city's old military institutions that occupies an entire block about ten streets south and a couple east of the Whitney itself. Built around a vast drill hall, the Armory otherwise comprises a number of grand ceremonial rooms, scattered offices and a few musty annexes. These days it serves as something between a low-key museum and an eccentric public event space, and here the idea was that it could more appropriately house the sort of work that operates outside the usual white walls of the museum's gallery spaces, under the general rubric of 'performance'.

A couple of weeks after handing over the proposal we were summoned to the Armory and shown a tiny cupboard of a room that the curators rightly suspected we might appreciate – a clandestine dressing chamber behind a false wall in the old Commander's quarters accessible via a secret door among the

[8] See §3.1 for an explanation of how the mirror works. The device had acquired a certain notoriety over the previous three decades, especially in New York where the company had a store also in the Lower East Side during the 1980s, right round the corner from the Dexter Sinister basement. The True Mirror Co. astutely marketed their product as an esoteric self-help device that would, convincingly enough, reveal the way others see you, and so perhaps a true(r) sense of self. The company also published their less convincing 'Hair Part Theory', which declaims on the universal laws of hair/personality perception. See: http://www.truemirror.com.

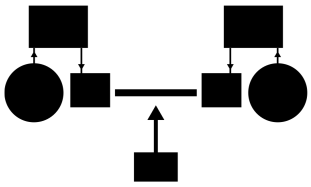
regular panelling that sprang open when a secret button was pressed. We were free to use this room if we wanted, and indeed ended moving in for the entire three weeks of the Armory's auxiliary operation.

As mentioned, by this point we'd decided to invite a pool of kindred spirits to *reflect or reflect on* the biennial – an invitation entirely open to interpretation. Our first and most important task was to galvanize this group into responding with appropriate decorum and urgency. How to incubate the sort of rigor and commitment necessary to make such a nebulous project plausible and meaningful? And then: beyond this initial set of requests, what was left for us to do, exactly? We resolved to begin our own direct contribution only when the Biennial opened, producing whatever needed to be produced on the fly during those three weeks in residence, designing and circulating those as-yet phantom contributions as and when they arrived.

In order to hone and communicate this we drafted a second document. Like the poem, what became a single compressed page designed to be sent to the Whitney office via fax was only *nominally* addressed to the curators, in the sense that we were more pointedly using it to realize and crystallize our role in the enterprise. The double agency of these documents seemed an increasingly efficient and instructive way to go about developing the project.

Along with the various literary references written into the poem, we'd also been busy assimilating a pair of interrelated concepts developed around the middle of the 20th century: Claude Shannon's Information Theory[9] and Norbert Wiener's Cybernetics.[10] Information Theory is concerned with the quantification of communication in terms of abstract 'bits' of data, while Cybernetics is the science of feedback, adjusting future conduct on the basis of past performance. We would propel the project by dual means: (a) by introducing 'noise' into whatever channels of communication seemed appropriate to the nature of the incoming writing (Information Theory); and (b) by regulating our approach according to whatever happened in situ, emphasizing the live, real-time aspect (Cybernetics). We could imagine, for instance, adjusting the relative clarity or obscurity of what we were up to as a whole according to how we perceived the *public*'s perception of the project as it unfolded in time.

This second document was written under the influence of another found graphic, this time drawn from Charles & Ray Eames's short film *A Communications Primer* (1953):



> Here is Claude Shannon's diagram by which almost any communication process can be schematically represented. The information source selects the desired message out of a set of possible messages, the transmitter changes the message into the signal, which is sent over the communications channel to the receiver, where it is decoded back into the message and delivered to the destination. Every such system contains noise. Noise is a term used in the communications field to designate any outside force, which acts on the transmitted signal to vary it from the original.[11]

[9] Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

[10] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1948).

[11] Charles and Ray Eames, *A Communications Primer* (1953). See: https://archive.org/details/communications_primer.

Shannon's simple flow diagram traces the path of transmission from sender to receiver, interrupted and affected by noise, which can be aural (a siren, an air conditioner, scratches on a record) or visual (fog, traffic, scratches on a film).

We understood that the majority of our work would occur at the beginning and end of the project, with the actual writing of the Press Releases occupying a protracted middle period. As such, *True Mirror* as a whole could be slotted into Shannon's diagram too, with our setup conditions as 'input', the writing as unpredictable 'noise', and the eventual releases as consequently affected output.

We faxed this second part of the proposal to the Whitney office from a Fed-Ex shop around the corner a couple of minutes before our next meeting, in order that it arrived at more or less the same time we did. Again the idea was to accentuate how the specific means by which a message is channelled can embody and ideally reinforce its proposition. So for example, a relatively primitive (in fact virtually extinct) fax machine would provide a markedly low-grade, cartoon demonstration of noise (i.e. its binary black-or-white signal and limited resolution). This clarified things: the different responses from our 'correspondents' would be sent via as many different channels, both in terms of formal template (e.g. the poem) and technological medium (e.g. the fax), according to the nature of each incoming missive.

Covertly titled *Message-Signal-Noise-Channel*, the fax comprises a set of soundbites, written in view of being used in the same manner we intended for our eventual Press Releases, i.e. cannibalized and re-circulated in another time and place. As the Eames film notes, obscurity and longevity – in the form of delay – is endemic to certain kinds of communication:

> In any communication system, the receiver must be able to decode something of what the transmitter coded, or no information gets to the destination at all. If you speak Chinese to me, I must know Chinese to understand your words. But even without knowing the Chinese language, I can understand much of your feelings through other codes we have in common.
>
> But there are also many examples of times when the message has been conceived and the signal sent long in advance of understanding or acceptance of the code employed. In the case of Galileo or Socrates, it did not in time matter, but the receivers of their time were not tuned to receive their signal. The ultimate transmission of such a message represents communication of a very complex order. Other high levels of communication occur in very different areas. A wave breaking on a beach brings a world of information about events far out at sea. It can tell of winds and storms, the distance and intensity. It can locate reefs and islands and many things. If you know the code.

Besides the general proposal, the fax lists a few ancillary ideas similarly conceived as 'delayed' signals – obscure hooks or clues that would advertise or otherwise allude to the main project. In the event, a couple of these ideas proved impracticable (the rewired public phones in the foyer, the twin klieg lights on the opening night), but four actual True Mirrors ended up installed in the Whitney's and Armory's public toilets for the duration of the biennial – and only one broken, apparently by the fist of a freaked-out reflection.

Here follows the *Message-Signal-Noise-Channel* as fed into the Fed-Ex fax:

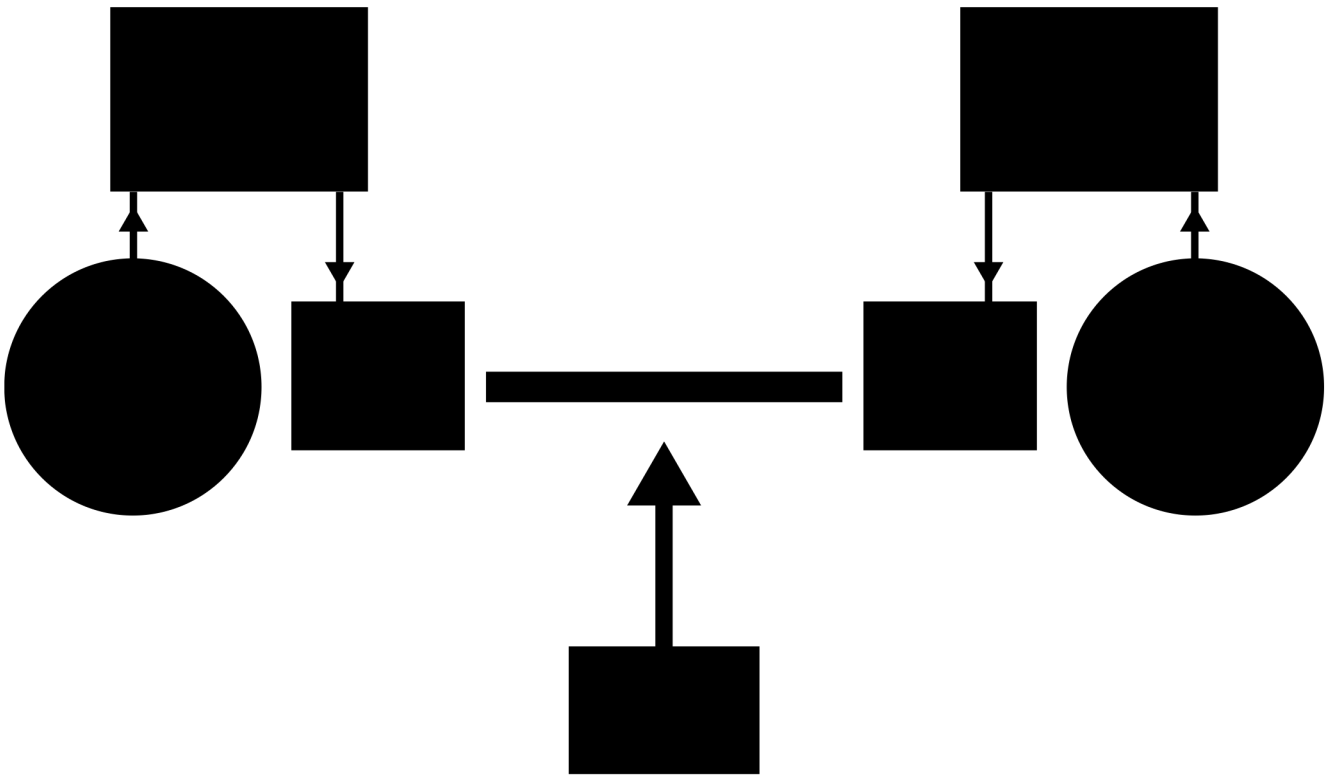
Starting from the 2008 Whitney Biennial press preview, Dexter Sinister plan to set up a temporary information office at the 7th Regiment Armory building. Over the following 3 weeks while the Armory operates as a shadow site for the exhibition, DS will issue a series of press releases through multiple distribution channels -- variously commissioning, designing, editing and releasing texts parallel to the regular biennial PR.

The press release is a form whose distribution aspect is already inscribed. Typically compressed into a series of literal sound-bites on a single sheet of paper, they are designed to be easily re-purposed -- copied, pasted, combined and inserted back into other media streams. By adopting this form, existing information pathways could provide a fluid channel for dispersing alternate and multiple points-of-view, both found and newly-commissioned. Where most press texts are written with an obvious vested interest -- just as any published text comes framed by the context of its publisher (whether it likes it or not) -- these releases will exist without an editorial umbrella, or at least one obtuse enough to resist contamination. Further, the specific nature of each contribution will precisely determine the form of its distribution channel. In other words, *The message, plus its resultant form, multiplied by the channel of distribution, divided by the context of its reception, equals the substance of its communication.* The forms could be equally commonplace (a group email or fax) or sophisticated (a private phone call or reactive concerto for muted trumpet.) Allowing the process of channeling to unfold over 3 weeks, the intention is to slow down the typically immediate consumption of the biennial project.

In addition, four small Armory projects are proposed in advance of the 3 week residence, to act as signals towards a reading of the activities to come. These are equally considered as "releases," but already in place for the press preview. The signals are: 1. PUBLIC PHONES -- the 3 ground floor public phones rewired to carry live or pre-recorded texts, serving as one very local distribution channel; 2. TRUE MIRRORS -- custom-built True Mirrors installed in all publicly-accessible Armory restrooms; 3. KLIEG LIGHT -- a spotlight based on the description by Margaret Wertheim in her *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, June 20, 2007: *It's quite easy to conjure up a faster-than-light shadow, at least in theory. Build a great klieg light, a . . . version of the ones set up at the Academy Awards. Now paste a piece of black paper onto the klieg's glass so there is a shadow in the middle of the beam, like the signal used to summon Batman . . . The key to our trick is to rotate the klieg . . . At a great enough distance from the source, our shadow . . . will go so fast it will exceed the speed of light.* This pure signal can function as both sign and release -- a marker of the Armory's location and its shadow relation to the Whitney Museum ten blocks away; and 4. PRIVATE ROOM (Commander's room/Colonel's dressing room) -- working from this hidden room for the duration, the visible Commander's room door will remain locked, and the office accessible only by pressing the panel and releasing the door. DS are listed as occupying this space, but there should be no announcement of this as "hidden" or "secret." The public may access the room by the panel, though again, the existence of this button should not be announced; the fact that the operation is out of sight is of little consequence, or at least without any explicit claim to performance.

It is critical to this proposal that the resources required to operate autonomously and efficiently are provided up-front. (Timing is everything with press releases, professionals assure us.) First, a budget for the upfront projects needs to be secured, as well as obvious contact resources including the biennial email, postal mail and broadcast-fax lists. Then, a separate operating budget should be arranged for the 3-week period that would cover writers' (or, equally, performers') fees, reproduction and distribution costs. On the conclusion of this 3 weeks, a close reader, collecting the accumulated press releases, may form a composite, alternate reading of the biennial. And perhaps more effectively, the echoes of these releases could continue to resonate through other media channels as the releases are re-released, circulated and distorted long after the show closes. The result may be a time-delayed shadow, or even refracted image, of the event rendered indistinct by its own circulation. And remember:

*Quality is merely the distribution aspect of quantity.*
*Quantity is merely the distribution aspect of quality.*



## 4.4: I I I I I I I I QUOTE

Following the poem and the fax, the third and final preparatory document was a letter of invitation to our prospective writers. We'd settled on soliciting around 40 people, each of whom had at some point written or otherwise produced something 'in line with the project's concerns'.

It was composed on another almost bygone technology, an electronic IBM golfball typewriter we'd recently found abandoned but still just about working on the street outside the basement. For reasons outlined in the letter, our thinking was to write it as we typed it, line by line. The machine had other ideas: it died before we managed to run through a single clean version without errors, so a master had to be collaged from previous attempts – with a few visible scars – before being duplicated by Xerox. The letter's recondite tone is as much a consequence of having been inadvertently collaged in this way, as the slow and stilted effect of typewriting per se.

Once again this was an opportunity to synthesize a few loose but unformed ideas in a manner that embodied them; and inasmuch as the ambiguous premise of *True Mirror* was already markedly unusual (compared with more commonplace publicity, at least), it would likely yield equally 'off' and so particularly telling results. In which case we could reasonably expect our releases to be purposive, despite lacking any obvious purpose.

Where the poem compacted a large pile of research in order to convey our broad interests using a familiar rhetorical form with readymade typographic conventions (lines broken according to rhythm and meaning, numbered stanzas, annotations), and the fax pushed some subsequent ideas through a machine with graphic limitations that left their mark in line with some of the ideas *in* that message, the letter conflates the two. Its severe, halting tone is a consequence of having been written 'live' on a very particular – and particularly temperamental – technology; and so again the medium is at least one integral aspect of the message:

Whitney

Doublin, 7 January 2008

Dear cooperator,

I have taken the typewriter down from the stack of boxes in the backroom in order to guarantee a certain slowness and precision here. I'm after the formality that is so easily obliterated by more recent and ubiquitous technologies, and in this spirit I write to you -- one of a small community of convalescents -- in the hope of convincing you to participate in this not because you can or can't but because you care and will.*

From the 7th Regiment Armory building on Park Avenue in New York City -- a parallel site to the 2008 Whitney Biennial exhibition -- I aim to coordinate a series of PRESS RELEASES written by different people and issued through different distribution channels. My hope is that this will slow down, complicate, or at least draw out the reception of the exhibition. Given both the location and status -- at a vortex of critical mass -- the Whitney Biennial is immediately cannibalized by the media who surround it: reviews are typically written on the first day before the general public is invited, and each critic duty-bound to weigh in with their direct interpretations of the show. The result is that for most the exhibition is REviewed before it has even been viewed. As such, my interest is in the possibility of arranging another reading through these parallel press releases ... released neither under the umbrella of the Whitney Museum nor that of any known publication. What happens when information is released from within the show but not sanctioned by The Show? (It functions as a shadow.) (It functions as a mirror.)

Proof of the fact that a mechanical device can
Reproduce personality
And that Quality is merely
The distribution aspect of Quantity.
Journalists have conquered the book form;
Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual;
The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers,
but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers,
but distributors.
The result is rapid turnover,
The regime of the bestseller
But there will always be
A parallel circuit, a black market.

And so this letter is addressed to no one in particular, but specific to each of you for reasons I trust you understand. I suppose I am merely asking you to write as a (Wo)Man of the Crowd, a community that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional exuberant politics of dedication (I quote.)

If you accept all this -- and the invitation -- you will contribute a reflective text to double as a press release. This could be a new text, an existing text, or not even a text at all. Furthermore, it might be produced remotely, or on-site with me at the Armory in the Commander's Room, a locked offiee accessed by a secret panel release from the Colonel's Ballroom. Your press will then be released during the three weeks following the opening of the exhibition, with the channel of distribution -- fax, word-of-mouth, trumpet, parachute etc. -- directly determined by the contents of its message. Normal press releases are, of course, typically compressed into a series of literal sound bites on a single sheet of paper and designed to be easily re-purposed -- copied, pasted, combined and inserted back into other media streams. This model might as well be our point of departure too.

I hope that my formula of 'disinteredness plus admiration' will seduce you (I I I I I I I I quote) and that the various non-textual qualities of this missive fill in some of the gaps in explanation. If so, we ought to continue this discussion by email or telephone (see below). Please try to get in touch within the next week.

For now,

Dexter Sinister

Dexter Sinister
38 Ludlow Street (basement south), New York, NY 10002, USA
Tel: +1 213 235 6296 / Email: info@dextersinister.org

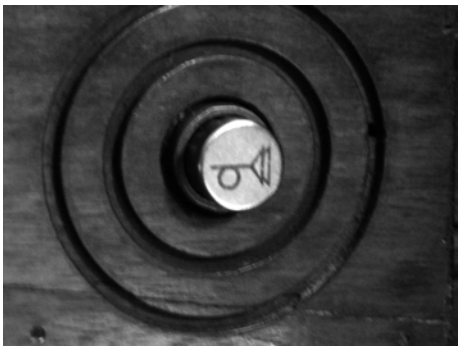
* And what do you do? You just SIT there. (I quote)

Working from the top down, the letter's scramble of elements begins with a patently out-of-character Whitney logotype, its elegant script roughly printed from a second-hand rubberstamp found by chance in the store where we went to order equivalent blocks of the Whitney's actual identity. In fact the script is more or less the polar opposite of the proper logo's blocky font, which, given the general interest in mirroring, seemed extra-felicitous.

The 'Doublin' address is a double allusion too – in reference to both the general idea of duplicating the Whitney's regular PR, and to James Joyce's nickname for his hometown Dublin. Duly inspired, we mailed all 40 letters in a single package to Ireland, and had a friend re-mail them to the individual addressees from a Doublin' address, figuring that most of the recipients would be surprised to receive a letter from Ireland and so already curious. This is precisely the sort of roundabout means of engagement we had in mind for the whole project.



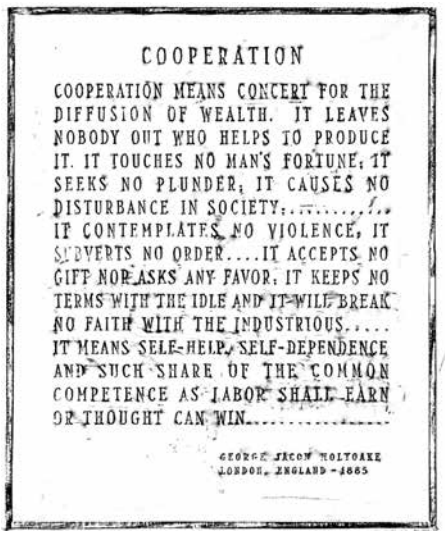
Another appropriated element, this time a symbol quoted out of context – then adopted as a recurring signal throughout *True Mirror* – is the muted post-horn from Thomas Pynchon's novella *The Crying of Lot 49*, the plot of which involves a sub-rosa postal service known as W.A.S.T.E. whose collection points are marked by this 'silent' trumpet. We'd already stencilled the horn onto Dexter Sinister's gatepost a couple of years beforehand, but here this icon of clandestine distribution seemed even more apposite. We used it as the central symbol on a website we eventually set up in order to track our Press Releases as and when they were produced, then stamped or otherwise inscribed the symbol to serve as an obscure imprint on most of material releases, and finally had it engraved into a magnet that capped the button that released the door to our Commander's Room office.



Moving through the letter's text, here are some further annotations:

– That presumptious *Dear cooperator* alludes to two other, interrelated recent pieces of work: a large piece of frottage, and a small enamel panel. The former is a 150 x 120 cm wax rubbing of a 'monument to cooperation', a brass relief from 1885 that sets out the socialist principles of a housing community around the corner from Dexter Sinister. The rubbing was made by Will Holder in the summer of 2007, then subsequently hung in a number of appropriate contexts – such as on a gallery wall later the same year during the production of *Dot Dot Dot* #15 in Geneva. It was also photographed and used as a title page of one of that issue's essays, 'The Anxiety of Influence', a piece of and about plagiarism by novelist and essayist Jonathan Lethem.[12] Like our Whitney letter, Lethem's essay is a compound text comprised exclusively from fragments of others' writing and stitched together so seamlessly that it's fairly shocking two thirds of the way through to learn you've actually been reading a collection of excerpts (that are then exhaustively referenced in a pair of postscripts). The other piece, a small enamel panel headed 'A Contract', was conceived as a modest update of the housing monument for the Information Age. In 2009 we had the text silkscreened onto hand-sized pieces of aluminium, red on white, and have intermittently nailed them to the walls of a number of the more collegial institutions we've worked with since.

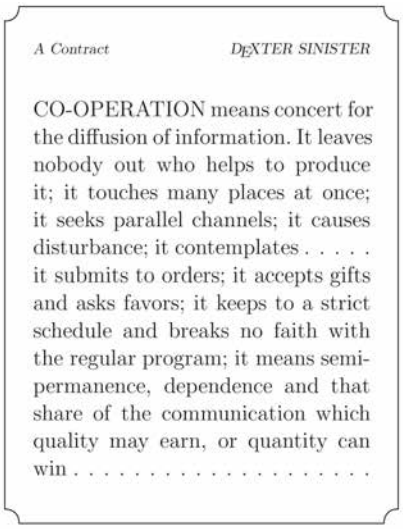
[12] Lethem, 'The Anxiety of Influence', op. cit. For more on the Geneva project, see §2.1.



COOPERATION

COOPERATION MEANS CONCERT FOR THE DIFFUSION OF WEALTH. IT LEAVES NOBODY OUT WHO HELPS TO PRODUCE IT. IT TOUCHES NO MAN'S FORTUNE; IT SEEKS NO PLUNDER; IT CAUSES NO DISTURBANCE IN SOCIETY;..... IT CONTEMPLATES NO VIOLENCE, IT SUBVERTS NO ORDER....IT ACCEPTS NO GIFT NOR ASKS ANY FAVOR. IT KEEPS NO TERMS WITH THE IDLE AND IT WILL BREAK NO FAITH WITH THE INDUSTRIOUS..... IT MEANS SELF-HELP, SELF-DEPENDENCE AND SUCH SHARE OF THE COMMON COMPETENCE AS LABOR SHALL EARN OR THOUGHT CAN WIN.....

GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE
LONDON, ENGLAND - 1865



*A Contract* *DEXTER SINISTER*

CO-OPERATION means concert for the diffusion of information. It leaves nobody out who helps to produce it; it touches many places at once; it seeks parallel channels; it causes disturbance; it contemplates . . . . . it submits to orders; it accepts gifts and asks favors; it keeps to a strict schedule and breaks no faith with the regular program; it means semi-permanence, dependence and that share of the communication which quality may earn, or quantity can win . . . . . .

– The solemn reference to a *community of convalescents* and its attendant ethics (*not because you can or can't but because you care and will*) are transplanted from an essay we'd recently worked on with art critic Jan Verwoert called 'Exhaustion and Exuberance'.[13] Here Verwoert addresses the contemporary imperative to be permanently 'on call', i.e. perpetually ready and willing to work at the expense of all else. He counterposes a number of ways to defy such a pressure, and in the closing paragraphs of the essay finds solace and inspiration in a passage from Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Man of the Crowd* (1840). Forced to convalesce after a debilitating illness, the story's protagonist spends the story regarding his surroundings – initially with disinterest, then increasing curiosity, and finally vitality. Verwoert then applies this model of recuperation relative to the discourse of modernism, and concludes by claiming this state of convalescence to be a wholly positive moment of heightened awareness and recalibration, a gathering of new resources, purpose and momentum:

> As a state of suspension between exhaustion and activity, between the I Can't and the I Can, the state of convalescence is the epitome of an empty moment of full awareness. In this moment the illusion of potency, interrupted through illness, is not yet restored (there is no way that you can go back to work in this state) but still the sense of appreciation is redeemed as the I Care returns in its full potential: you begin to care about life again, more than ever.
>
> Could we imagine this state of convalescence as a shared condition of experience, or rather a condition shared through art and thinking? If, living under the pressure to perform, we begin to see that a state of exhaustion is a horizon of collective experience, could we then understand this experience as the point of departure for the formation of a particular form of solidarity? A solidarity that would not lay the foundations for the assertion of a potent operative community, but which would, on the contrary, lead us to acknowledge that the one thing we share – exhaustion – makes us an inoperative community, an exhausted community, or a community of the exhausted. A community, however, that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional, exuberant politics of dedication. In short, because, as a community of convalescents, we realise in an empty moment of full awareness, that we care.[14]

[13] Jan Verwoert, 'Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform', *Dot Dot Dot* #15, 2008. See §2.1.

[14] Ibid., p. 110.

– The letter goes on to quote one of its sister documents, the *True Mirror* poem (another example of involuted plagiarism), in the long indented excerpt that begins *Proof of the fact that a mechanical device can reproduce personality, and that quality is merely the distribution aspect of quantity*. The line is drawn from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Bend Sinister*.[15] The 'mechanical device' is a padograph, a fictional typewriter that can be customized to mimic the owner's handwriting and so present the illusion of a personal inscription 'with repellent perfection'. In the context of *Bend Sinister*'s fascist dystopia, the device is emblematic of a phony humanism:

> Although, of course, a close examination of the script never failed to reveal the presence of a mechanical medium, a good deal of more or less foolish deceit could be practised. You could, for instance, have your padograph based on the handwriting of a correspondent and then play all kinds of pranks on him and his friends (...) one purchaser after another enjoyed the luxury of seeing the essence of his incomplex personality distilled by the magic of an elaborate instrument.[16]

The second half of the same quoted sentence is a slippery, reversible maxim that we put to use elsewhere in the Whitney project: 'Quantity is the distribution aspect of quality / Quality is the distribution aspect of quantity'. And this is followed in the letter's cannibalised poem by a few commensurate thoughts on the dismal state of popular publishing, freely reworked from Deleuze's meandering thoughts in the TV interview *L'Abecedaire*. 'Journalists have conquered the book form … writing is now the tiny affair of the individual … the customers have changed: televisions aren't viewers, but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers, but distributors.' Yet he concludes on an optimistic note: 'There will always be a parallel circuit, a black market.'

– Next, the phrase *I hope that my formula of 'disinterestedness plus admiration' will seduce you* is lifted from an Open Letter by poet-turned-artist Marcel Broodthaers, specifically one that announced the opening of the first of his series of fictitious museums in 1968.[17] Like that Dublin postmark, the phrase is primarily appropriated here as enigmatic punctuation, yet it's fitting to consider our letter itself 'disinterested' in the simple sense of being set up to function at a distance – to create the conditions for something else to happen in due course. We also parrot Broodthaers's repeated self in the parenthetical 'I I I I I I I I quote', a line from another, earlier Open Letter later repurposed (i.e. Broodthaers quoting himself) in *Telephone*, a vacuum-formed plastic 'industrial poem'. These are small plastic plates moulded with blind-embossed text that inscribe an 'industrial' substrate with equally 'industrial' language, thus modelling what we were out to achieve with our Press Releases: symbiotic form and content.

– Lastly, the letter's final words, *And what do you do? You just SIT there,* are poached from the middle of a short text by cultural critic Michael Bracewell. We were so taken with this ominous reproach that we stuck it at the foot of the letter, suffixed by an asterisk to the line in the main body that ends 'because you care and will.' It comes from 'A Prose Kinema', some notes written to accompany a group exhibition, *Pale Carnage*, at Arnolfini in Bristol a year beforehand.[18] That show's title and theme are drawn from a poem by Ezra Pound that describes the exhausted state of art at the outset of modernism. Michael's introductory notes augment this sense of cultural anaemia, which in turn recalls – and anticipates – the 'used up' condition of *contemporary* culture that Jan describes in 'Exhaustion and Exuberance'. At the end of his *Cantos*, Pound wrote: 'I have brought the great ball of crystal; who can lift it?' Bracewell's odd little provocation – And what do you do? – was likewise put to work as a

[15] Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* [1947] (London: Penguin, 1974).

[16] Ibid., p. 65.

[17] See: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Industrial Poems, Open Letters', *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

[18] Michael Bracewell, 'A Prose Kinema: Some Notes for Pale Carnage', op. cit., p. iv.

little moral conscience at the end of our invitation, the aim of which, after all, was to urge its respondents into action.

## 4.5: THE SHADOW GOES …

Although the three mediums and messages recounted so far fulfilled entirely practical ends along the way, they also limbered us up for the real thing. A couple of months later, on the morning after the Biennial's opening night, we installed ourselves in the Commander's Room with the 40 or less responses now due to arrive at irregular intervals over the next three weeks for us to edit and design at speed into a parallel circuit of PR.

In the event, the so-called Press Releases ranged from fairly prosaic formats, such as laser prints and emails, to the more far-out and sophisticated. The weirder end of the spectrum included: photographer Jason Fulford's set of ambient 'audio guides' montaged from conversations discreetly recorded at the Biennial's opening; artist Sarah Crowner's republication of both issues of *The Blind Man*, the seminal pamphlet co-produced by Marcel Duchamp, the first of which was made for the first public exhibition of the European proto-modernist vanguard – the 1913 Armory Show; writer Steve Rushton's 10-minute YouTube video primer on Cybernetics and Information Theory; typographer Will Holder's day-long stint as an elevator operator at the Whitney building spent in dialogue with the Biennial audience as they moved between floors; and musician Alex Waterman's 'B for Bartelby', a languid composition for cello, an archaic stroh violin, and various bits of modern office machinery, written in homage to Herman Melville's short story *Bartelby the Scrivener* (the protagonist of which famously 'prefers not to' work) and performed one time only for an audience at the Armory building one afternoon.

The idea that our Press Releases might productively circulate in 'outside' media streams, increasingly removed from the source and perhaps increasingly degenerate, happened sooner than expected. Less than a week after the show opened, a journalist writing a brief review in popular conservative tabloid *The New York Post* reported:

> The first thing I did upon entering the Whitney was race toward the second-floor restroom – not out of necessity, but out of curiosity. Would there be art displayed in there? It's happened before, and is a pretty sure gauge of the Biennial's free-for-all ethos. Sure enough, there was something above the hand dryer: A black metal box with an angled mirror inside.[19]

A day or so later, we re-released this review ourselves via the regular Whitney press mailing list. Cut from the page of the *Post*, we juxtaposed it with a brief description of those True Mirrors he refers to in the bathroom found in an old issue of *Harper's Magazine*:

[19] Mario Naves, 'Alas the Biennial is … Kinda Boring', *New York Post*, 11 March, 2008.

NOVEMBER 1994
$2.95

HARPER'S

## READINGS

[Press Release]

# A MIRROR FOR THE REFLECTIVE

*From a press release issued last summer by the True Mirror Company in New York City. A 12"x12" True Mirror costs $195.*

The True Mirror Company has created a mirror that will revolutionize the way people view themselves. Constructed from two mirrors positioned at an exact 90 degree angle, the True Mirror reflects true images of its viewers; it does not reverse images the way all other mirrors do. When a person looks in an ordinary mirror and raises his right arm, what he sees is his image raising the arm on the left side. In a True Mirror, the reflection actually raises the right arm; the mirror thus provides a true picture of how he appears to others. This can result in key improvements in styles of hair and clothing, especially if the style is purposely asymmetrical. For example, wearing a beret at different angles produces entirely different looks. By using the True Mirror, a person can determine which look truly suits him the best.

For some, the True Mirror has an additional, much deeper effect: it reveals hidden aspects of their inner selves. Viewers notice that certain qualities appear in the True Mirror that they never saw before, especially what can be best described as their "inner spark" or "light." This is possibly a result of the split between the left brain and the right brain. Because the brain has two different parts, it sends different messages from each side; these messages appear on different sides of the face, where they merge to form personality. By reversing the two sides, a typical mirror presents a vision that is quite different from the real person; what one sees in the True Mirror is much more lifelike.

This feature of the True Mirror will help people understand why others react to them the way they do. It will show them who they actually are and what they really want out of life.

MARCH 17, 2008

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER

NEW YORK'S WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

Art

# Alas, the Biennial Is ... Kinda Boring

*The Whitney's biggest wingding is back. Our critic heads straight for museum restroom, examines fixtures. Are they art? Could be!*



MARIO NAVES

Somewhere there's an art history graduate student sitting in Starbucks, laptop and venti decaf latte on hand, writing a thesis on the Whitney Biennial. It's bound to be a history of arrant egos, frustrated reputations, political intrigue, curatorial missteps and temporary fame.

Part of the narrative will be an inventory of reviews. Given the negative and sometimes vitriolic criticism the Biennial has engendered over the years, it should be an entertaining and maybe hilarious roundup. But then, any exhibition purporting to define the current state of American art is asking for it.

You've got to have some sympathy for the curators—to paraphrase R&B duo Sam and Dave, the Biennial can't stand up for falling down. Yet it's a perennial hit, and judging by the crush of media types that showed up for the press preview, the 2008 edition will be no exception. (The general public can expect to wait in a line trailing around the corner of Madison and 75th Street.)

The first thing I did upon entering the Whitney was race toward the second-floor restroom—not out of necessity, but out of curiosity. Would there be art displayed in there? It's happened before, and is a pretty sure gauge of the Biennial's free-for-all ethos. Sure enough, there was *something* above the hand dryer: A black metal box with an angled mirror inside.

I couldn't find an identifying label, but a security guard assured me it was a work of art. Another guard told me there was a similar black box in the ladies' room. The gracious press folks knew nothing about them. The Biennial image list doesn't include the black boxes, nor does the catalog. Were they a long-term installation, a work from the permanent collection or artful bathroom fixtures?

Probably the latter, but that's the confusion the contemporary scene poses: What *isn't* art? The Biennial doesn't answer the question because it hardly realizes the question exists. The art world elite and the culture at large take for granted that anything is fair game; artists have a liberty of means that was unimaginable 50 years ago. But the only thing heedless freedom has resulted in is avant-gardist novelty.

FOR RELEASE IMMEDIATE 13 MARCH 2008 -- DEXTER SINISTER WILL OCCUPY THE COMMANDER'S ROOM AT THE 7TH REGIMENT ARMORY EVERY DAY FROM 4 MARCH TO 23 MARCH 2008 RELEASING A SERIES OF PARALLEL TEXTS THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS OF DISTRIBUTION WHICH REFLECT ON THE 2008 WHITNEY BIENNIAL. MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE ON THE TRUE MIRROR WEBSITE: http://www.sinisterdexter.org/

On the third day we set up a website, www.sinisterdexter.org, in order to track the Releases. So far we'd reasoned that documenting them all in some higher-level container would override the specificity of their various individual channels of distribution, which was after all one of the main points of the project. In practice, working on up to ten releases at any given moment, all at different speeds and with varying degrees of complexity, we started to realize that a website could serve as a useful docket, a means of keeping tabs on the work in progress, as opposed to merely archiving it after the event[20] – hence tracking seemed a more appropriate verb than documenting. Each new Release then required a title for the site's inventory, usually a gnomic fragment from its text: 'Facts are totally untrue', 'But that's the confusion the contemporary scene poses', 'Five Whys and The Hundredth Monkey Effect', 'WBPR08', and so on.

On the face of it, the fourth entry, 'Sans Comic', by local artist Cory Arcangel, was simply the Whitney's official press release reset in the ubiquitous 'joke' font Comic Sans; but his contribution was far more insidious than that. During the first couple of days, Cory rigged up a mainframe in the Commander's Room that allowed us to send emails and other digital documents so as to appear (on the receiver's end) to have come direct from the Museum's regular press office. His real 'release' therefore consists in providing us with the tools necessary to mimic the official channel, with the Comic Sans PDF serving as a decoy proof – an inaugural document sent out to the Whitney's press list to check whether the duplicate mainframe worked.

Cory's piece indicates why *True Mirror* was a difficult project to document without misleading, or at least wrongly weighting the work. Some contributions defied even cursory archiving, with the very first release – in many ways the simplest and oddest of all – being a prime case in point. Fundamentally, 'The Shadow Goes' found form as a rumour, ideally be circulated by word-of mouth. It was inspired by a recent Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* that describes how to make a shadow travel faster than the speed of light;[21] and in fact for some time we'd been lobbying the Whitney to realize the technically challenging setup described in the article, in view of assembling a pair of glamorous Klieg lights to shine from the Biennial's two locations on the opening night. According to the author of the article, Margaret Wertheim from the mysterious LA-based Institute for Figuring ('dedicated to the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of science, mathematics and engineering'), what we hoped to achieve required applying a black silhouette of the (flipped, inverted) Whitney logotype to the surface of each spotlight that, if rotated at a certain speed in the night sky, would project a shadow of the graphic that would supposedly move faster than the light surrounding it. (!)

But the plan was flawed: we were unable to source any material for the silhouette that would resist the heat generated by such a lamp, and were forced to scrap the idea. In homage, then, we produced a somewhat lesser but far more practicable version in the form of two complementary single-sheet Press Releases laser-printed in large quantities just in time for the opening.[22] The one distributed at the Whitney claimed that a Klieg light with such a Whitney shadow was stationed at the Armory Building projecting towards the Museum ten blocks away, while the one distributed at the Armory claimed exactly the opposite. Neither was actually true, of course, but in looping between the two locations the rumour at least established a mental projection of the beams with their shadow logos crossed in the sky, looping between the two locations – a metaphorical beam. We also used this first release – named for the article, 'The Shadow Goes' – to announce the rest of the project about to occur.

[20] That said, www.sinisterdexter.org is still online at the time of writing. Visually if not literally a mirror site to www.dextersinister.org, it's about as neutral a container as it gets.

[21] Margaret Wertheim, 'Op Ed: The Shadow Goes', *The New York Times*, Wednesday 20 June 2007. A fragment of this text had already appeared in the *True Mirror* poem, plus an image of the article in the 'sources'. See § 4.2 above.

[22] See the double recto/verso frontispiece of the present chapter: spot the difference.

## 4.6: AS IF YOU COULD EVER WORK THAT OUT IN ADVANCE

One of the more substantial Releases involved Jan Verwoert again, this time in the form of three instalments of a Socratic dialogue written on-site in the Commander's Room. His aim was to articulate, and ultimately advocate, the vicissitudes of conceptual art with particular reference to this year's Whitney show. Casually assembling observations and anecdotes from our immediate surroundings, Jan asserts a distinction between what he calls a 'hermeneutics of desire' founded on utopian notions of straight-talk and transparency native to the first wave of conceptual art in the 1960s, and a contrary contemporary *hermeticism* of desire that, while rooted in the same progressive ideas, tends towards antithetical devices: secrets, innuendos, codes and doublespeak.

From this perspective, the project of conceptual art ought not be conceived as a failed or ended project, only one that has changed its mode of address; and by alluding to the project he's currently embedded in himself, he uses *True Mirror*'s means to reflect on those means:

IF THIS IS CONCEPTUAL ART, THEN WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

If you ask me, you're right to raise the question! For what was conceptual art about if not the hope to make art communicate meaning differently – clearly – without shrouding it in mystery as artists had done for centuries?

Wasn't the transparency of ideas and intentions part and parcel of the utopian promise of conceptualism? This is why artists used this very medium – text – rather than imagery, to reduce ambiguity, to convince rather than seduce, and finally make direct contact with the people on the receiving end.

It's probably true that in understanding art as a tool for information, conceptual artists were adapting their working methods to the latest standards of immaterial labour imposed by Information Capitalism – and that, by presenting documents as artworks, they were unwittingly paying homage to the logical, authoritative air of bureaucracy.

Yet, it still stands to reason that the driving force, or if you will, the *desire* articulated through the new language of art as text, or art as idea, was not that different from the spirit of free experimentation with the conventions of social communication that the hippy culture of the time was politically and emotionally engaged with. What is conceptual art if not one such experiment in creating the conditions for a better, less alienated life by changing the ways how we communicate; an attempt to cut the crap and find a way to reach other people and talk freely? Take Lee Lozano's *Conversation Piece*, for example.

Negri and Hardt argue in *Empire* that social communication, and the human potentials to create communality – in short all that defines social life – has become a resource for the growth economy of the creative industries.[23] To re-appropriate the means of production today, they say, means to claim your life back and set the terms of how you want to communicate. In light of this analysis, it would seem productive to go back to the early 1970s and re-experience the ways in which people were searching for new forms of communication and communality … Does that answer your question?

Actually it doesn't – satisfy his interlocutory double, that is; at least not yet. But in the two sequels written the following two days, Jan thinks through various retorts to his fairly brazen claims; and it becomes gradually apparent that what might initially come across as a markedly self-reflexive exercise is fundamentally a call to 'work it out together'. His 'conceptualism', like ours, is foremost a communal project:

[23] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000).

IF THIS IS A CONTEMPORARY ART SHOW, THEN WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

It's difficult to say, I agree. We don't even quite know what it means to be contemporary. What is the time that we live in about? People say we live in times of uncertainty. Is this the one certainty we share, then? How do we even know that this much is certain?

IT'S WHAT THE ART SHOWS US: 'UNCERTAINTY' IS WHAT THE ART REPRESENTS AND EXPRESSES, ISN'T IT?

Well, yes maybe you could say that … but still, how can we be certain that the art here represents contemporary uncertainty? For it to do that it would surely have to be certain in its expression for these expressions of uncertainty to convincingly represent the contemporary sentiment. I'm not trying to be paradoxical or contrarian here. I'm simply not convinced that art relates to the contemporary by 'representing' or 'expressing' it.

To paraphrase what comes next: the way art could function beyond the either-or representation/ expression binary, he says, is by fashioning ciphers, pre-emptive codes, that *anticipate* cultural concerns – a national or global recession, for example – and in doing so *prepare* us for them. 'Isn't that the fascinating thing about contemporaneity … that to be truly contemporary you actually have to be slightly ahead of yourself, you have to be decidedly *uncontemporary* in order to prefigure, presage, and prepare yourself for what's to come.' He recalls his own adolescence as a case in point: 'the first time around … trying to initiate myself in the codes of alienation as a teenage goth … I deliberately put on a record I didn't like very much … The Jesus and Mary Chain's *Psychocandy*'.

IF YOU'RE DESCRIBING A KIND OF CRISIS SCENARIO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

I'd say we're doing a lot already. For some years we've been preparing ourselves for crisis and presaging its eventual occurrence by developing a code of crisis in art, fashion and music – a contemporary form of dark new romanticism (call it 'neo-goth' if you like; I don't think I'd want to). Anyway, if that code wasn't already firmly established, I don't believe we'd even be in a position to recognize, describe and experience the current situation of recession as a crisis. We'd simply lack the terms to do so. Naming a crisis as such already demonstrates that we're defining and controlling the moment. To give a name is to sign a contract, and our contract with contemporary culture is now signed in the name of crisis. That's the cipher we've chosen to interpret – or encrypt – our experience of the present moment. And so I believe we're already proficient in the use of that code. We know it off by heart … but still rehearse it to initiate ourselves further.

To be honest, as a European I'm always amazed, and even slightly jealous, when I see how fast U.S. culture recodes its codes to prefigure and frame the near future. Where I come from people put styles and ideas through the mill for what seems like forever, and whatever survives the grind might be reasonably sound but deeply unattractive – to the point that there seems to be no reason to even bother immersing yourself in the experience these styles and ideas may have once enabled you to have.

Don't get me wrong: I *like* it fast. I admire the agility of U.S. culture to recodify its codes, re-encrypt its ciphers; revisit, recycle and revivify its icons in different incarnations. Just start your tour of the Whitney from the 'old' collection on the top floor and you'll see what I mean. It's the image of a country and culture overwritten, reconfigured, recast and recoded ceaselessly, insistently, and most of all, performatively. It's a constant performance of recodification. And it's a great performance. The rest of the world lines up at the box office to go and see it.

DO I SENSE A TRACE OF IRONY IN WHAT YOU'RE SAYING?

Um, yeah maybe … but I think only because the situation is inherently ironic – by which I mean that although I'm aware of producing and consuming a rapidly codified culture while being endlessly attracted to it, I still feel slightly uneasy about its codes. It's not a question of morals, really. I don't *mind* being corrupted and consumed by ciphers that promise attractive experiences. After all, how else

would you learn about what you feel and think? Still, there is a certain discomfort with regard to how that codification works here. Speed is not really the problem.

Okay, you might argue that the fast pace at which all this happens is set by the market, because as long as it's still thriving it needs products to circulate – and that, if people took a bit more time to think about what they're doing and what they actually want, the products that they would eventually put out would be coded differently – or not products at all. Then again, so much of this so-called extra time or 'non-productive' time taken tends to be consumed by the anxious desire to figure out the right thing, the legitimate thing, to do. *As if you could ever work that out in advance* – sanctifying your cause *a priori*, categorically and unassailably. In the end, I think, it's better to get your hands dirty and deal with the challenge of the code.

The last 'response' cuts off mid-sentence:

… perhaps not to reject the act of codification and passion for the secret as such, but to perform it differently, with a different mode of address, one that interrupts itself before it arrives at a workable cipher and engenders the values that …

To stick with Jan's Release as an exemplary instance of the project at large: on receiving his words as raw material, how might we appropriately disperse this particular contribution on the basis of, say, it's happy paradoxes (supremely timely, yet avowedly out-of-time; pontificating directly about the virtues of indirectness)? In this case, we edited each day's instalment to fit a single page of Legal-format paper to be digitally printed and collated at a local copy shop into 500-sheet block pads, glued at the top in order that Biennial passersby could tear off a sheet to pocket and read later. They were produced and installed as soon as possible after they had been written, set on the floor at the entrance of each of the galleries on the Whitney's three main floors (the first day's text on the first floor, second on the second, third on the third), with new pads made when they ran out.

In attempting to grasp the nuances of his immediate response to the Biennial, Jan telescopes between art history generally, this year's biennial specifically, and – by implication – our project, too. But despite his conclusion that the situation is (positively) hermetic, his own writing is the opposite: pointed outward, a generous account of the current situation, to the extent that it *can* be assimilated and articulated in situ. There's an odd humour to Jan's piece that's more earnest than sarcastic, and so counter to the didacticism of the patriarchal authority he condemns in passing. He's careful not to let these ideas harden into ideology: interpretation remains the responsibility of the viewer or reader. 'Who could embody those powers more forcefully', he asks, 'than any individual who assumes the position of the juror of the past? Without a judge there is no trial, and in the absence of a verdict any case can be reopened at any time. Oedipus Schmoedipus …'

## 4.7: HOW BITS OF SENTENCES TRAVEL

Here's one final Release that took the form of a brief email exchange with Dutch art critic Arie Altena, tracked under the cumbersome title 'RE: OPEN LETTER from Dublin as doublin' signed Dexter Sinister'. As with Jan's conceptual dialogue, this one's so exemplary of the haphazard discursive spirit we were chasing with this project that it's worth quoting at length.

We'd sent one of our letters from Dublin to Arie because of his interest in the work of James Joyce – which is to say, due to the loose association of our having stolen Joyce's Doublin' pun (which itself shows how loose the qualification for invitation could be). On this occasion, the exchange didn't conclude in a product per se, yet still seemed pertinent enough to warrant some kind of Release; and so we ended up simply forwarding a lightly edited version of the email correspondence to the *True Mirror* mailing list and simultaneously shelved it on the website like all the rest:

Dear Arie,

I guess I have to write this assuming you received a letter from Dublin, though the bastards didn't put that on the franked postmark, right? If you haven't received a letter you'll have no idea what I'm talking

about here. In which case, a scan of the same can also be found on the True Mirror website we've just set up: www.sinisterdexter.org.

Our project for the Whitney Biennial has nothing directly to do with your possibly writing an article for us about Joyce's reference to Dublin as doublin', but everything to do with it indirectly. Both are concerned with mirrors, shadows, gaps and parallels as metaphors and points of departure.

Why is this so difficult to explain? All I'm trying to say is that we'd love you to contribute something to this Whitney project.

OK.

The letter you received was sent to a small list of people, who all have some vested interest in the sorts of things we're hoping to think through together. It's intended as a starting point for a discussion regarding what and how you might contribute (if willing and able). I'm sure a lot needs to be clarified or elucidated, and if you respond with a sign of interest we could start that procedure. Basically, from the trigger of the generic term 'press release', anything is possible.

--

Dear Dexter,

Yes, the letter of invitation arrived in the post a few days ago. I'll pick up in the next few days, and see if doublin' up a shadow piece on Joyce might intersect with a strange double of a press release …

As for press releases, writing, journalism, in general … I see what you mean and to a large extent I agree. I have been guilty in a sense of much of what you say too. It's how the 'writing' & journalism industry is organized nowadays, and how it is necessarily organized around selling the writing (be it at one remove – the paying magazine acting as a contractor, which is good, as it can also ensure a larger independence/disinterest of the writer; this is the classic model, of course). A writer is hired and does his/her job as well as possible. I think this is basically okay, and I think most writers/journalists try to do their job well. They at least try to write well. But time is short; especially thinking-time. What we miss in the 'fast media' is time to reflect. What I miss personally is time to look much harder, read harder, think harder. (It does not always pay off, of course.) My intention in writing is never to make people go to see/hear/read something as it is to see/hear/read better. And I'm afraid I often do a bad job at that – as a hired writer with a deadline. But then, I'm still learning to write.

I have also written press releases and descriptions of art works for catalogues (you know the genre). I must say that I enjoy doing it, because it has taught me a lot about writing – how to make sentences work, how to try to put as much information as possible in a sentence and still be clear, how to not state the same twice, or even three times. I also see how these texts stage the interpretation given in a lot of quick reviews (not in all cases – not at all; the situation is not that bad). But it is funny to see how these things function.

In a sense I find it fascinating to see how certain bits of texts are circulated, rewritten, keep on coming back: the description of a work of art given by an artist (asked by a despairing curator, who needs text tomorrow, no, *today*, for the PR person to advertise the show); the bits of text stating the aim of a show, or festival, or the description of a festival theme (worked out over a long time, written for the first time for a subsidy request, re-used for publicity, for a press-release, as an introduction to a night of discussions – such texts evolve over time and are re-used again by the reviewer who states what a show might be about &c.)

BTW: There is no 'world' that searches so hard again and again for the 'new' as the world of contemporary art. It is worse – much worse even – than in the world of pop music. I have never understood that. 95% of what is 'new' for one person (or world) is old hat for a much larger group – especially as the world of culture and art evolves slowly; certainly now. It is much more interesting to see how culture/art evolves in practice, in all these different pockets of the world (and here I mean 'world' in a geographical sense rather than, let's say, a 'group').

Well, I'll just dispatch this, not even looking again at what I wrote, hoping it makes sense …

--

Dear Arie,

Sorry I'm only getting around now to responding … though even as I'm writing that I'm thinking, why am I apologizing for the slowness (focus, attention) we're supposedly advocating? Since when has three days been slow?

Frankly, I wasn't expecting such a gratifyingly involved response. There's a hell of a lot in your mail to build on. Whether this is tied up with Joyce at all is completely open (maybe only by implication or influence). I'm going to separate and elaborate the various possible lines of thinking we might pursue:

1. The economy of interest/disinterest. How the concrete job (being paid to be interested) enables the abstract musing (in what you're actually interested in), or at least an understanding of where these aspects do and don't intersect. I enjoy, too, the idea of your writing about something that would usually be seen as negative (at its most extreme/melodramatic form: prostitution) from a positive, progressive viewpoint. Mark E. Smith always talks about his group The Fall as if it were any other community of workers, which I suppose here means 'manual labourers'; and specifically about how he, being the boss, had 'mouths to feed'. 'It's that kind of industry', he says, i.e. anything but glamorous remove from the world the pop group is or was supposed to represent. I admire that kind of candid contrarian, the practical polemicist – antagonistically taking the opposite opinion to the orthodoxy for its own, productive sake. Smith again: 'Whenever I say anything, I often think that the opposite is true as well. Sometimes I think the truth is too fucking obvious for people to take. The possibilities are endless and people don't like that. They go for the average every time. Well, that doesn't interest me in the slightest.' Michael Bracewell called this 'The ability to provoke and doubt, simultaneously', which he adds 'has often been cited as being fundamental to great art.'[24]

2. Time to look/read/think harder. This reminds me of a line I loved in a video work that Ryan Gander first showed at the Stedelijk Museum last year called *The Last Work*.[25] As he's musing, recording (it seems to me) the exact speed of thinking while drifting from his studio to his home in East London, he dwells on the idea of taking a sabbatical, taking time off, and how people are very suspicious of the idea. He says: 'just because you're not producing, doesn't mean you're not working. If you're a certain kind of person you're always working, even if the working is just thinking.' I'm probably paraphrasing wildly, and in retrospect it seems very banal, but still, for me at least it has the ring of an infrequently acknowledged truth.

3. Still learning to write, and the idea that you always are. Since writing to you, I haven't been able to get the beginning-end-continuum of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* out of my head: how sublime that first/last looping word 'riverrun' is, connecting the end back to the start, seamless and unpunctuated. Writing as perpetual practice. The idea is very close to home at the moment due to my involvement in publishing a couple of novels by a forgotten English writer called E.C. Large. He's a model of the practising, *constitutional* Sunday writer; writing because he *had to*, to stay sane, in the guise of a hobby. In many of his early articles scattered around the little literary and philosophy journals of the 1930s you can sense him limbering up to write the four books he eventually published – and this limbering has its own specific quality. This in turn reminds me of a report on the 1966 English World Cup victory by another below-radar British writer, B.S. Johnson. It's an incredible slow-motion account of the game, razor-sharp and economical, but then also only special if you read it framed by his other writing. This is how a lot of art works too: Ryan's line about 'always working, always thinking' wouldn't have meant much to me, for better or worse, if I didn't know him personally. This kind of positive incest is a very tricky thing to deal with, or at least acknowledge, in writing about and around art – and yet

[24] All quotes from: Michael Bracewell and Jon Wilde, 'Mark E. Smith', *frieze*, no. 6, September/October 1992.

[25] See §3.9(b).

we're all prey to it. There's something interesting to explore here, perhaps, about that taboo of writing about friends; how it both helps and hinders.

4. The circulation of texts. Even the brief experience of the few bits we've had to write for the catalogues, programmes and wall captions at the Whitney is very telling. Given the premise of what we're up to here, we've been trying to manipulate such formats more forcibly than we otherwise might – for example, inserting fragments into descriptions, statements, biographies etc. that might appear to be editorial oversights, deliberately repeating lines, or subjectively rewriting supposedly objective descriptions of ourselves. You write: 'In a sense I find it fascinating to see how certain bits of texts are circulated, rewritten, keep on coming back.' This is precisely what we're interested in exploring.

5. Newness. Reading your comments on the mindless drive for the 'new' in art, I keep returning to Nabokov's line about 'reality' being the only word that should always be set in quotation marks.

We could carry on like this, perhaps.

--

Dear Dexter,

I know, I know, this will be too late. You've been sending me mails, tiptoe-ing, reminding me of a text to be written, promised earlier. My inbox is my to-do list, and this weekend it contains four e-mails from sender 'Dexter Sinister'.

Is it that we always overestimate the time we'll have in the future? I certainly seem to. Or is it rather that we underestimate how much attention and concentration the task will need? Looking back, I always think: but I *must* have had the hours to do it. Maybe I did have the hours, but I did not have the time to think, to give attention. 'I need more time' might signify 'I need more hours in a day'. It might also signify 'I need more concentration, undisturbed moments, more flow, more getting caught up in the flow of things, more attention'. More time to reflect – and I think 'time to reflect' and 'attention' are not measured in hours-of-work.

Time and money – they are always on the mind of a writer. Joyce's letters are filled with money matters, not with musings on literature. Samuel Delany states somewhere in one of his essays in *About Writing* that novels are always about money. I don't want money. I need 'time'. But this is about money too; it always is. I'm lucky to have a decent job that pays the rent. I don't have to worry too much. But the jobs take time, and I have hobbies that take time, (I need cycling trips to stay sane …), living with someone takes time. Priorities, you say … you have to set priorities. But I'd like to do it all. I have to cut back somewhere, and *that* is about money …

But we were going to talk about writing, not about time and money. We were going to talk about how texts travel through different media and contexts, how they are used and re-used, edited, re-written, translated, transformed.

Some text-work is 'just work', it's 'labour' – I don't intend anything negative with that. When you organize a show, or a festival, you need text. In the first place to make clear to yourself, and then also to others with whom you are working, what you are up to. Then you need text to convince others to collaborate, a means of presenting to your 'boss', your colleagues, and the institutions that will hopefully give you money. And then, you need text for the first publicity and text to invite other artists and lecturers. As you approach the event, you need more text for publicity, but also for critics and journalists that you hope will visit, will interview the artists and lecturers that you've invited with your text. And of course you need text for the exhibition – descriptions of the art, of what's going to happen around it. Although all these texts are just one part of the process of organizing an event (other people talk on phones, face-to-face; so many informal e-mails going back and forth), I find it fascinating to see how bits of sentences travel through that whole process.

Writing a press release is really something other than developing, in text, the content for an event. Of course, you say. Writing the press release partly consists in ransacking the texts already written –

for those good sentences, to repurpose them, rewriting them, refining them, as you go along. And so it happens that the first press release text turns out to be better than the previous texts, and is then used for the e-mails, for stating the theme of the event, becomes the text for the website. It might be re-used and rewritten again for a late or later subsidy request, improved again, maybe extended a bit for that purpose, and that text then is used again for later press releases, slightly rewritten, shortened. This is the economy of texts. And once the publicity takes off a bit, you see your texts turning up in different contexts: blogs and magazines refer to it, put it in their agendas, etc. etc.

What I was getting at was this: the labour of writing and editing such texts *does* take time, it *does* take working hours. It is labour that can be done when one is tired too. It can be done at the last instance before the deadline: a last check, a last correction, a few last re-phrasings.

An e-mail like this one, on the other hand, needs a different type of attention. it needs (in my case) a feeling of F L O W (being caught up in a stream of ideas, you have an idea of what you'd like to say, and you give it shape with every sentence, and out of the improvisation a structure is built). I cannot 'just do it' (though once I sit down to do it, it feels like I could've done it at any time). It needs to be there in my head for days, slowly ticking away in the back of my head, taking shape even while I'm not thinking about it. Attention, not hours. TIME, not time.

Regarding the problem of friendship, this is a difficult area. Not so much for the 'incest' thing. Generally, you or I wouldn't push friends' work without being 100% convinced by it, but because knowing the author/artist of a work makes you see so much more – where it comes from, what it's connected to.

You tend to fill in the significant gaps with information known from the friendship. That makes it more subjective too – and so difficult to assess the quality. But if the work is truly good, I think, anyone else can fill in the significant gaps and, well, have a worthwhile experience/thought/emotion.

What I find troublesome to deal with is the call for the 'new' and the 'newest', 'latest'. Where critics and organizers almost become the prophets of what will come after. I was once on a panel about art and biotechology when someone in the audience interrogated me critically for failing to come up with a prediction of the next thing in contemporary art. As if that's what I would obviously be interested in. As if art is this progression from the comeback of conceptual art, via the new blossoming of painting, towards locative art, and then after that, biotech art, and then, yes, then what? Can you please predict? (These things are important for the art market: 'How will such and so be doing in two years time; is it a good way of making my money work?') ('Well, a good way of making your money "work" is making sure that art is to be made, put your money in organizing concerts, give funds to artists, et cetera.') (Ah, money again.) Of course, you try to be topical, organizing something (a festival, an exhibition), you set a context for the now (and the future) and you rewrite the past. Of course you can hit exactly the right note, and you can equally hit the wrong note too. And of course things change; for instance, painting nowadays (however interesting) simply does not bear the same cultural weight it had, say, 100 years ago; and 200 years ago there was no biotechnological art (though there was art that reflected on the progression in science). Back to 'new': what I *can* deal with is the Poundian 'MAKE IT NEW', without the call for the newest and the latest, which is something else altogether.

'We could carry on like this perhaps.'

Sure.

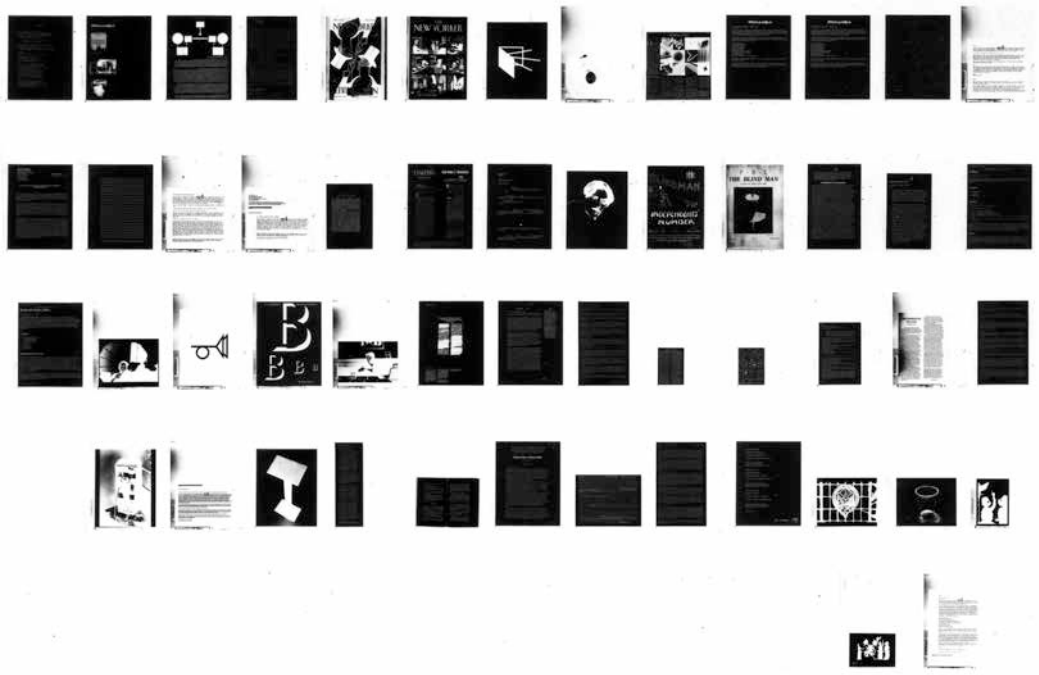
## 4.8: ALWAYS PRODUCTION, NEVER DOCUMENTATION

It's probably apparent from all the above that the majority of *True Mirror* was undercover, slow-burning, obfuscating, often aimed at very specific audiences or otherwise barely circulated. Contrary to our initial determination to avoid documenting it, on perceiving this limited reach towards the end of our time in the Commander's Room we resolved to *re*-channel the whole thing through some sort of enveloping format.

However, we were still concerned about the danger of diluting or misrepresenting the component parts, and the more obvious containers – a book or an exhibition, say – seemed less than satisfactory, again likely to obliterate the essential specificity of each release and so fundamentally at odds with at least one of the project's founding interests.

Then we thought of microfiche – a material carrier that seemed apt for a number of reasons. This is an archiving technology that, in 2008, was, like the typewriter and the fax, on the verge of being wiped out by its digital equivalents. Being an emphatically modest medium (diminutive, typically monochrome), like many of the other more eccentric Releases it yields a very particular form. It is typically made by photographing the pages of a document (usually, but not exclusively, printed matter), developing the sequence onto 16 mm film (the 'microfiche'), then cutting and arranging the strips of film into a contact sheet (the 'fiche'), both of which can be duplicated in negative. The outcome is a highly compressed analogue carrier. Somewhat counter-intuitively, then, we reasoned that the format of the fiche was so particular as to transcend being *merely* a container and turn into something else altogether. That's to say, in line with a phrase that had become a mantra over the three weeks, *Always production, never documentation*, we could reasonably conceive of a fiche container as becoming an autonomous piece of work in its own right, pointing forwards rather than backwards – a dash rather than a full stop.

Unlike most fiches, ours would house a collection of separate documents rather than the pages of a single one. We chose an icon to represent each release (usually a symbol, the front page of a document, or a photograph of an object) and arranged them in chronological order:



Then the further idea emerged to project it as a backdrop to a lecture that would serve to map its structure. *Always production*. This became *True Mirror Microfiche*, staged later the same year at The Kitchen, a performance space in Chelsea, New York.[26] We billed the event as a 'cubist variety show' – though someone else later also called it a 'documents opera'. Basically, extracts from all the Press Releases were read or otherwise performed by a motley cast of collaborators (including some who recited parts of their own texts), along with fragments of pre-recorded audio, video, and live music. These elements were chronologically strung together and edited so as to draw out the project's broader themes – the exhaustion and exuberance, Cybernetics and Information Theory, the ways in

[26] Dexter Sinister, *True Mirror Microfiche*, The Kitchen, New York, 25 November, 2008.

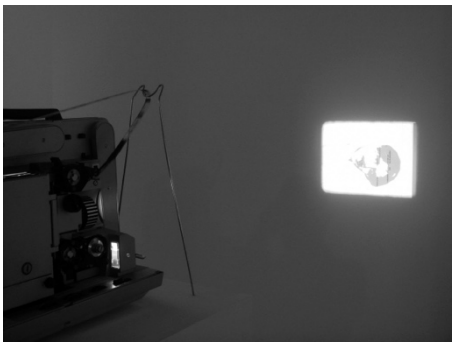
which information gets affected by its carrier, communal production, and so on. In short, all the previous Releases were squeezed through a new channel as idiosyncratic and telling as the rest.

The action was simultaneoulsy fixed *and* free in the sense that the content and order were very tightly scripted, yet patently improvised within this structure. In effect, the 'variety show' was edited and mixed live by David and myself, more or less haphazardly directing the performers, recordings, props and lights (the relative volume and visibility of things) as we went along.

The same script we were using to direct the proceedings was also supplied to the audience, albeit with truncated versions of the parts to be read and pithy descriptions of other planned incidents; and so they were well aware that we were trying to maintain some semblance of this plan while assimilating accidents and attempting to draw out any passing resonances. Meanwhile, someone in the audience was instructed to (try to) follow where we were in the diagram of the evening on the projected fiche with a laser pointer – a precarious dot on a trajectory. From the audience's point of view, the net result of all this was almost certainly more slapstick than streamlined.

In a second version performed at the ICA in London a few months later,[27] the idea was to precisely duplicate (again fractionally but crucially distinct from 'document') what had happened the first time around, while aware that it would be fundamentally impossible to do so. In order to exaggerate the fact that the production was already a level removed from the first iteration, rather than return strictly to the original script, we gathered a cast of London-based colleagues to restage what their New York counterparts had ended up doing.





We also assembled a 'trailer' for this second *True Mirror Microfiche* by splicing that original strip of positive 16 mm film into a loop, compressing the 53 icons of the Whitney releases into a two-second flicker-film and projecting it small on a wall in the ICA's entrance corridor.[28] The more iconic images – a portrait of Wyndham Lewis, the cover of *The Blind Man*, Pynchon's Post-horn – were just about legible for a split second within this strobing animation. An adjacent caption noted the date and time of the eventual event.

This is the revied London version of the script that we and the 'players' had to work from, and the audience had to hand:

[27] Dexter Sinister, *True Mirror Microfiche*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, May 30, 2009. This iteration occurred under the auspices of the larger group exhibition, *Talk Show*, 6–31 May, 2009, curated by Richard Birkett, Will Holder and Jennifer Thatcher,

[28] This *Trailer for True Mirror Microfiche* played for the duration of *Talk Show*. It was partly conceived as a visual counterpart to the Press Release made for *True Mirror* by Mark Beasley. Tracked as 'WBPR08' on www.sinisterdexter.org, this is an audio recording of the official Whitney Biennial press release compressed to 1.316 seconds in homage to British hardcore band Napalm Death's notorious 1.316-second track 'You Suffer' (1988).

The INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS, London, Saturday May 30 2009, 7pm. (A mirror image of THE KITCHEN, New York City. Tuesday November 25 2008, 7pm.)

INT. A black box oriented to the east. Raking seats face a level stage on the floor. Various props (a PAIR OF LECTERNS, a GLITTER-COATED DRUM KIT, a TRUE MIRROR, etc.) are scattered about the space. A constantly rising canon (the SHEPHARD'S TONE) is barely audible above the general murmur of small talk as an audience assembles itself.

While reading the program provided on each seat a similar thought crosses the mind of each member of the audience: THE FIRST RULE IS ALWAYS PRODUCTION NEVER DOCUMENTATION. THE SECOND RULE IS THERE IS NO FIRST RULE.

A music video, ABC AUTO INDUSTRY from the OMD LP DAZZLE SHIPS (1983), produced by PEOPLE'S PALACE PRODUCTIONS, plays on a large projection screen which overhangs the centre of the stage area.

KODWO ESHUN (as MICHAEL PORTNOY) walks to the RIGHT LECTERN, puts on a pair of mirror shades and glares at the audience. From the back of the room, S walks down the stairs and positions a small microfiche onto a VISUALISER at ground level, which projects onto the screen. The image comprises 53 chronologically-arranged icons of so-called PRESS RELEASES produced at the 7th Regiment Armory Building during March 2008. The red dot of a laser pointer appears on the first microfiche icon and attempts to track subsequent progress throughout the evening.

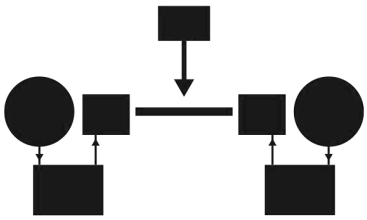
This appears to signal the BEGINNING.

K E begins to read a long poem, and continues to do so in fragments throughout the evening.

K E : THE FIRST POEM WAS THE TITLE POEM ...

During the above, a fax machine on the LEFT of the stage ejects a message. JJ CHARLESWORTH (as DOMENICK AMMARATI) takes it, walks to the LEFT LECTERN and (when K E has finished speaking) reads from it. Switching on a OHP, which projects onto the RIGHT wall, JENNIFER HIGGIE (as LARISSA HARRIS) draws an accompanying diagram of MESSAGE-SIGNAL-NOISE-CHANNEL.

JJ C : THE PRESS RELEASE IS A FORM WHOSE DISTRIBUTION ASPECT IS ALREADY INSCRIBED ...

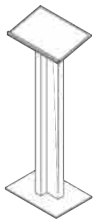


During the above, SPOTLIGHT on CALLY SPOONER (as SARAH CROWNER) in a chair at the desk. She opens a letter with a Dublin postmark and begins reading to herself. The voice of MARIA FUSCO reads along.

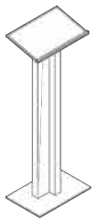
M F : (Audio) DOUBLIN, 7 JANUARY 2008 ...

Throughout the above introductions, D (as S) & S (as D) have been reading copies of the NEW YORKER in the front row. They now close and discard them, then walk to the TWIN LECTERNS. From somewhere, a note from a MUTED TRUMPET.

When she has finished reading, C S puts the letter back in its envelope and picks up the NEW YORK TIMES. As 2 SPOTLIGHTS project towards the back wall, S & D begin to simultaneously recite the first actual press release, voices panned HARD RIGHT & LEFT.



S : FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, 4TH MARCH 2008 ...



D : FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, 4TH MARCH 2008 ...

Sound is panned STEREO again. ISLA LEAVER-YAP (as DIANA KAMIN) carries a small pile of newspapers to the RIGHT LECTERN and (when S & D have finished speaking) recites a series of haikus collaged by WALEAD BESHTY from reviews of the 2008 Whitney Biennial.

I LY : 81 ARTISTS ...

The VISUALISER is turned OFF. CALLY SPOONER begins typing an email on a laptop, which is projected onto the screen.

C S : (Typing) DEXTER ...

During the above, a 28 ft. long fax from JOHN RUSSELL spews from the machine. KATIE BARRINGTON (as UH THOMPSON) collects some pages mid-spew, walks to the LEFT LECTERN and begins to read.

UH T : FLATNESS AS AN AQUA-SHAPE-MODEL-CRYSTAL, WHAT DO WORDS DO TO (ART) OBJECTS? ...

During the above, footage of a JERRY SEINFELD stand-up routine, hosted by JOHNNY CARSON, with a voice-over by CORY ARCANGEL (as himself) plays on the screen.

J C : THE NEXT GUEST IS A YOUNG COMEDIAN WHO'S MAKING HIS VERY FIRST APPEARANCE ON THE TONIGHT SHOW ...

During the above, C S stops typing. The VISUALISER is turned ON. The stand-up routine concludes with extended canned laughter.

During the above, from the RIGHT of the audience, MARK BEASLEY (as ROB GIAMPIETRO) walks to the RIGHT LECTERN. He begins to read his own close reading of the 100th chapter of ROBERT MUSIL's THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES (1930) on the nature of the PARALLEL CAMPAIGN from the copy of DOT DOT DOT 16 he is carrying,

M B : THE JOKE HERE, OF COURSE, IS ON GENERAL STUMM ...

M B closes book and exits at the BACK of the stage. From a door to the RIGHT of the stage, STEPHEN BEASLEY (as BRO GIAMPIETRO) enters, walks to the LEFT LECTERN and begins to read from the copy of DOT DOT DOT 16 he is carrying, quoting ROB GIAMPIETRO quoting GABRIEL ZAID on PLATO's PHAEDRUS.

S B : WHILE SOCRATES'S DISCUSSION OF LANGUAGE PRIVILEGES SPEECH OVER WRITING ...

During the above, MIKE SPERLINGER (as MARK BEASLEY) enters carring a copy of E.C. LARGE's novel ASLEEP IN THE AFTERNOON (1939). He walks to the RIGHT LECTERN and (when S B has finished speaking) begins to read as if in dialogue with the previous writer.

M S : EVERY SENTENCE HE WROTE WAS REFERRED TO HIS READERS ...



During the above, SPOTLIGHT on ELISSA SANTIAGO (as CAROLINE BUSTA) next to the TRUE MIRROR on the LEFT wall. When M S has finished speaking she reads from a press release issued by the TRUE MIRROR COMPANY, as republished in HARPER'S magazine (1984).

E S : THE TRUE MIRROR COMPANY HAS CREATED A MIRROR THAT WILL REVOLUTIONIZE THE WAY PEOPLE VIEW THEMSELVES ...

During the above, DAN FOX (as DOMENICK AMMARATI) walks to the LEFT LECTERN. When E S has finished reading, he begins to read a March 17 review of the 2008 Whitney Biennial from the NEW YORK OBSERVER.

D F : SOMEWHERE THERE'S AN ART HISTORY GRADUATE STUDENT ...

During the above, VANESSA DESCLAUX (as DIANA KAMIN) walks to the RIGHT LECTERN and (at the same time as D F) begins to read from GERALD BEASLEY & STORM VAN HELSING's release (after WYNDHAM LEWIS), including the gaps.

V D : RELEASE PRESS, CONTACT ...

During the above, TOM BENSON (as MIGUEL ABREU) walks to the LEFT LECTERN holding (inverted, republished) copies of THE BLIND MAN (1917) and proceeds to read a poem, MEDUSA by his distant cousin FRANCIS PICABIA.

T B : SINISTER RIGHT—DEXTER LEFT—SUPERIOR HYPOCRECY [SIC] ...

During the above, LUCY SKAER (as SARAH GEPHART) walks to the RIGHT LECTERN and (when T B has finished speaking) begins to read WILL HOLDER's Bauhaus scenario. S & D enact LASZLO & WASSILY's movements. They eventually meet centre stage to recite the closing dialogue.

L S : A MAN WALKS INTO A SPACE ...

S : (WASSILY) WE NEED TO TALK.
D : (LASZLO) I KNOW.



During the above, the first of JASON FULFORD's audio guides (ELEVATOR OPERATOR) begins to play. From the audience, MARK AERIAL WALLER (as PREM KRISHNAMURTHY) suddenly stands.

M A W : WHY?

D walks towards the audience to address the question.

D : BECAUSE A LEARNED BEHAVIOUR SPREADS INSTANTANEOUSLY FROM ONE GROUP OF MONKEYS TO ALL RELATED MONKEYS ...

M A W continues to ask a total of 5 WHYS. On each occasion, D responds, explaining the 100TH MONKEY EFFECT.

During the above, FIA BACKSTRÖM (as SAUL ANTON) walks to the LEFT LECTERN and (when D has finished speaking) begins to read from his book WARHOL'S DREAM, a dialogue between (A)NDY WARHOL & (B)OB SMITHSON.

F B : THE ANNOYING THING IS THAT WHENEVER PEOPLE HEAR THE WORD ART, THEY START ACTING LIKE LAWYERS ...



SPOTLIGHT on ALEX WATERMAN (as himself) centre stage, who announces his later performance of B FOR BARTELBY.

A W : GOOD EVENING ...

JASON FULFORD's audio guides continue to play.

## I N T E R M I S S I O N

The loud rehearsal of GUITAR & DRUM KIT draws the audience back into the theatre. When reassembled, STEVE RUSHTON's 10-minute explanation of contemporary feedback, DEPART FROM ZERO (with embedded excerpts from CHARLES & RAY EAMES's A COMMUNICATIONS PRIMER) plays on the screen.

S R : (Video) IN THE BROADEST ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION, MUCH WORK HAS RECENTLY BEEN DONE TO CLARIFY THEORIES AND MAKE THEM WORKABLE ...

During the above, S turns on a small MICROFICHE READER towards the back of the stage and focuses a detail from a microfiche fom the NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY press archive, as found by ALEX KLEIN.

The film ends, followed by an automated PowerPoint presentation by FRANCES STARK. When this eventually concludes, the VISUALISER is turned back ON.

F S : (PowerPoint) I MUST ANSWER YOUR REQUEST FOR A CONTRIBUTION ...

During the above, BEATRICE GIBSON reads from BENJAMIN FRANKLIN's POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK (1732–58), as doctored [SIC] by SHANNON EBNER. During the above, a MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE walks onstage and tears off a sheet from the 1st of 3 pads containing an episodic dialogue by JAN VERWOERT headed IF THIS HAD BEEN THE REVIEW OF THE PREVIEW. Later, other audience members follow suit.



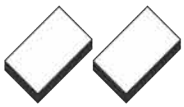
During the above, F B walks to the RIGHT LECTERN and begins to read from the supplementary ARMORY ADDENDUM to WARHOL'S DREAM.

F B : WE HEADED EAST OUT OF THE PARK UNTIL WE CAME TO PARK AVENUE ...

F B is interrupted (and stops reading) by a voiceover announcement from MICHAEL BRACEWELL.

M B : (Audio) IT HAS BECOME APPARENT THAT MANY BRITISH TOWNS AND CITIES ARE GRADUALLY BUT PERCEPTIBLY BECOMING IDENTICAL ...

During the above, a MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE walks onstage and tears off a sheet from the 2nd of 3 pads containing an episodic dialogue by JAN VERWOERT headed IF THIS WAS THE REVIEW OF THE PREVIEW. Later, other audience members follow suit.



During the above, S makes a phone call to California, and speaks with TOM MARIONI.

T M : HELLO?

During the above, from the audience, MARK AERIAL WALLER stands up again.

M A W : I HAVE A QUESTION!

S & D gesture to continue. He does.

During the above, WILL HOLDER (as ADAM PENDLETON) walks onstage and listens intently with a STETHOSCOPE to the LEFT LECTERN. He sings, first softly, then increasing in volume.

W H : SO IN DEED ...

During the above, MARK & STEPHEN BEASLEY return from separate sides of the audience and, from the DUAL LECTERNS, read the following caption simultaneously, voices panned HARD RIGHT & LEFT.

M B : THE WORK OF DEXTER SINISTER ...

S B : THE WORK OF DEXTER SINISTER ...

During the above, JENNIFER HIGGIE (as LARISSA HARRIS) walks to the OHP and projects a diagram of MAN-TREE-SQUIRREL. When M/S B have finished speaking, with sound panned STEREO again, she begins to ask a question from the RIGHT LECTERN.

J H : SOME YEARS AGO, BEING WITH A CAMPING PARTY IN THE MOUNTAINS ...

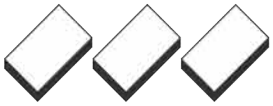


During the above, MARK BEASLEY (as himself) & KAISA LASSINARO (as ROSE KALLAL) walk to the GUITAR & DRUM KIT, and punctuate the question with a version of NAPALM DEATH's YOU SUFFER (1988, 1.316 secs).

J H answers her own question:

J H : (Ends) ... WHICH IS WHAT IS MEANT BY THE PRAGMATIC METHOD.

During the above, a MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE walks onstage and tears off a sheet from the 3rd of 3 pads containing an episodic dialogue by JAN VERWOERT headed IF THIS WERE TO BE THE PREVIEW TO THE REVIEW. Later, other audience members follow suit.



During the above, RUTH HÖFLICH (as TOBI MAIER) from 38 LUDLOW walks to the LEFT LECTERN, opens a letter and (when J H has finished speaking) reads the enclosed poem by ANDREAS NEUMEISTER (2008).

R H : DER KÜNSTLER IST ABWESEND ...

Throughout the 2nd half of the evening, musical fragments from DAN FOX's REFRACTED LIGHT THROUGH ARMORY SHOW (audio liner notes to the LP FROM BRUSSELS WITH LOVE (1983)) have been playing through the RIGHT SPEAKER, as recorded during a previous delivery of the notes in London on October 30, and mixed live by him (as himself).



During the above, ALEX WATERMAN (as himself) begins his performance of B FOR BARTELBY, a recording of a previous performance etched into plastic cups accompanied by post-horn calls on a STROH VIOLIN. 2 SPOTLIGHTS project the arrangement's shadows onto the back curtain.

As the music concludes, the VISUALISER and various lights around the stage are switched OFF. Finally, the house lights are turned ON.

This appears to signal the END. ∎

## 4.9: DRAMATIZED NOT AS SELF-REFLEXIVE BUT AS A COLLECTIVE REFLEXIVITY

Shortly after the London version of *True Mirror Microfiche*, one of its key participants, writer and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun (who played New York's Michael Portnoy) sent along an email that was such an astute summary of our own complicated sense of the event(s) that it became the starting point for yet another extension – in this case, a communally-written text.

Kodwo's email was a private note and therefore naturally full of shared references and allusions to prior discussions that anticipated our reading as much between the lines as the lines themselves. By way of necessary explication for a wider audience, then, we plugged the semantic gaps with extracts from the *Microfiche* evenings, which were of course already distillations of the original Whitney Releases. In sum, this is an extremely compressed, *processed* bunch of words, touched and affected by many people, places and technologies over a considerable period of time – and simultaneously *about* this process. In the version below, the lines from Kodwo's original email are indented and the rest excerpted from the performances, all fronted by a capital line from Michael Bracewell's release, 'Time Machine Wheel Clamped':[29]

IT IS ONLY WHEN ONE MANAGES TO SOMEHOW GAIN A GREAT HEIGHT OVER THIS NEW LANDSCAPE AND LOOK DOWN UPON IT, THAT YOU REALIZE WHAT HAS HAPPENED

> It was totally absorbing to take part in True Mirror.

A True Mirror reflects true images of its viewers. Constructed from two mirrors positioned at an exact 90-degree angle, it does not reverse images the way all other mirrors do. When a person looks in an ordinary mirror and raises his right arm, what he sees is his image raising the arm on the left side. In a True Mirror, the reflection actually raises the right arm; the mirror thus provides a true picture of how he appears to others. It will help people understand why others react to them the way they do, and show them who they actually are and what they really want.

> Your statement – I am paraphrasing here – 'always production never documentation' gave me a real insight into the project.

Being new is often understood as a combination of being different and being recently-produced. We call a car a new car if this car is different from other cars, and at the same time the latest, most recent model. But to be new is by no means the same as being different. The new is a difference without difference, or a difference beyond difference – a difference which we are unable to recognize. The only medium for a possible emergence of the new is the ordinary, the 'non-different', the identical – not the OTHER, but the SAME.

> To be part of a transmission circuit – or to be a medium – or a channel – in a diagram means that you re/transmit a part of a text or an image or a sound before you know exactly what that text or image is doing.

There are many examples of times when the message has been conceived and the signal sent long in advance of understanding or acceptance of the code employed. In the case of Galileo or Socrates, it did not in time matter, but the receivers of their time were not tuned to receive their signal. A wave breaking on a beach brings a world of information about events far out at sea. It can tell of winds and storms, the distance and intensity. It can locate reefs and islands and many things – if you know the code.

> You perform a part in a system in advance of a total understanding of that system.

[29] The consequent compound text was first published in the art writing journal *F.R. David: 'Keep it to yourself'*, 2009; then in *Dot Dot Dot* #20, 2010.

So much of our so-called extra time, or ‘non-productive’ time, tends to be consumed by the anxious desire to figure out THE RIGHT THING – the LEGITIMATE thing – to do. AS IF YOU COULD EVER WORK THAT OUT IN ADVANCE – sanctifying your cause A PRIORI, categorically and unassailably. In the end, I think, it’s better to get your hands dirty and deal with the challenge of the code.

The distinction between opacity/didacticism, or secrecy/transparency and then your elaboration of this – opacity as the portal to didacticism and vice versa – is helpful here.

(This is the question of hermeneutics versus hermeticism: whether we still believe art to be a tool of learning which serves to render the world and our desires transparent, as the hermeneutic approach maintains; or whether we would not rather assume art to be a hermetic language of coded innuendo that yields knowledge only to those willing to initiate themselves into its opaque codes and participate in the experience of codification. In the light of our scepticism that any language could ever be transparent, it seems that the hermetic take on how art makes meaning was much closer to the way things actually work.)

I see it as part of a turn towards cybernetics –

I’d like to oppose feedback to the notion of ‘top-down’ media – that’s the media where we sit as passive objects, consuming. Feedback is a neologism that was invented in the late 1940s by Norbert Weiner. Cybernetics is based on Kybernetes, a Greek sailor whose knowledge of the tides, the wind, and how the vessel operates, helped him guide the ship into port. So Cybernetics is a guidance system: what Kybernetes is doing on the prow of his ship is anticipating what will happen and changing his behaviour in accordance to a change of wind or whatever. That’s essentially the notion of feedback.

diagrammatics

(The MESSAGE
Plus its resultant FORM
Multiplied by the channel of DISTRIBUTION
Divided by the context of its RECEPTION
Equals the substance of its COMMUNICATION)

– which has 2 results:

1. Reflexivity is dramatized not as self-reflexive but as a collective reflexivity.

While Socrates’ discussion of language privileges speech over writing because writing makes people forgetful of what they know, his dialogue with Phaedrus has been discussed, debated, refuted, and republished for nearly two dozen centuries. Through writing, that speech has endured and enriched us, and it is here that Socrates got it very wrong. Thanks to books, we know Socrates distrusted books. Writing, reading, editing, printing, distributing, cataloguing, reviewing, can be fuel for that conversation, ways of keeping it lively. It could even be said that to publish a book is to insert it into the middle of that conversation, that to establish a publishing house, bookstore, or library is to start a conversation – a conversation that springs, as it should, from local debate, but that opens up, as it should, to all places and times.

2. Reflexivity becomes an energetic principle – more an impersonal current that starts to move and amplify in unpredictable paths.

The campaign originally exists only in the form of a vague idea manifesting itself first in loose verbal associations, then in a circular letter, and finally in a press release. It is thus an allegory of what one can do with words. The campaign only exists because people start to speak about it. The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be. The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be.

> 3. To name this as 'activating the archive' or 'the archival impulse' or 'knowledge production' doesn't quite capture an impulse which feels more like 4. A resurgent autodidacticism.

Negri and Hardt argue that social communication, and the human potentials to create communality – in short all that defines social life – has become a resource for the growth economy of the creative industries. To reappropriate the means of production today, they say, means to claim your life back and set the terms of how you want to communicate. A community that can still act, not because it is entitled to do so by the institutions of power, but by virtue of an unconditional exuberant politics of dedication.

> 5. A home made cybernetic pedagogy.

In fact it seems worth reconsidering across the board (and here I mean for everybody) why urgency in terms of production increasingly seems to overshadow urgency in terms of expression. Journalists have conquered the book form. Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual. The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers, but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers, but distributors. The result is rapid turnover, the regime of the best seller, but there will always be a parallel circuit, a black market.

> 6. More to follow on this.

From the vantage point of hermeticism this text, like any text, is not just a text but also a contract between you and me. But what arrangement it implies and what it would mean for either you or me to sign it, I cannot tell you. Perhaps we can work it out together … that seems to be the only viable way to continue. What do you think?[30]

In view of Eco's assertion that 'form must be a way of thinking', Eshun's 'collective reflexivity' describes the situation of a group *forming* something (a performance, a piece of work) in order to *think* a subject collectively,[31] yet without any individually-preconceived ideas of exactly what is being considered or communicated – that is, without any common idea as to what the various parts might amount to as a whole. Contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler calls this process 'transindividuation'. He explains:

> if you want to understand the individual, you need to inscribe the individual in a process of which he is only a phase. As such, the individual has no interests. The individual is only an aspect, or phase of a process, but the process is what is important. So what is this process? It is the process of individuation, that is of transformation (...)[32]

And so in the instance of *True Mirror*, we established a nominal structure (a premise, an environment, a script) along with an ostensible subject matter (the mechanics of communication, with particular reference to art PR). At the outset the *substance* is not yet determined, and there is plenty of room for

[30] The parenthetical fragments are from, in order of appearance: Michael Bracewell (title), The True Mirror Company, Boris Groys, Charles & Ray Eames, Jan Verwoert, Steve Rushton, Rob Giampietro, Gabriel Zaid, Stephen Willats, Frances Stark merged with Gilles Deleuze, and Verwoert again.

[31] Eshun's 'collective reflexivity' could readily apply to a few other recent art practices and works, such as New York-based Bernadette Corporation's chain-written group novella *Reena Spaulings* (2005); the science fiction exhibition and workshop *Philip*, set up by Mai Abu ElDahab (at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2006–7) to generate an eponymous work of fiction, likewise written by a loose group of artists, writers, curators and critics; and the various iterations of New York's Continuous Project, a self-described 'consultancy' that has playfully repurposed bits of art history via various publications, panel discussions, and exhibitions.

[32] Stiegler's term 'transindividuation'is conceived as an extension of fellow philosopher Gilbert Simondon's 'individuation'. See: Bernard Stiegler and Irit Rogoff, 'Transindividuation', *e-flux journal*, no. 14, March 2010, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/121, p. 3. More on this in §7.1.

manoeuvre. As with any self-reflexive work, the nature of this setup is made apparent to its audience (in this case an entire *situation* is reflected back on itself). And as with any live performance the audience also plays its part in the cybernetic drive, affecting the 'findings' of the 'investigation'.

Since the twin microfiche events, there have been still further dots along the *True Mirror* trajectory: two versions of print-on-demand books with the complete scripts of the Kitchen and ICA events subtitled *Post-Script* and *Post-Post-Script* respectively;[33] a 'double AA-side' vinyl LP, with Alex Waterman's 'B for Bartelby' Release assembled from three live performances at the Armory, the Kitchen, and the ICA on one side, backed with Dan Fox's 'Refracted Light Through Armoury Show', after his audio essay Release on the gap between European and American art (with particular reference to Marcel Duchamp and Talking Heads);[34] and most recently a 12-minute video compiled from footage of the ICA event based on the text based on the email from Kodwo Eshun.[35]

Each new iteration of this project was based on the previous instalment, then significantly re-worked according to the nature of the new circumstances and its attendant technology. During this serial process, the information written into those original Whitney Releases is increasingly subject to process*ing*, and so enacts the ideas behind those two founding interests Cybernetics and Information Theory. Like the increasingly affected message in the classic Telephone Game, the work moves from A to B to C to D and on, though D may be quite different to A – quite probably degraded, but also possibly refined. The various 'true mirrors' recounted here record this difference between input and output, with the noise in between generated by us in order to register what happens in between.

[33] Dexter Sinister, *True Mirror Microfiche Post-Script* (2009) and *True Mirror Microfiche Post-Post-Script* (2010), both produced via the online publishing site lulu.com. The most recent version is still available at the time of writing to download as a PDF or order as a book. See: http://www.lulu.com/shop/dexter-sinister/true-mirror-microfiche-post-post-script/paperback/product-11599807.html.

[34] Dexter Sinister, *True Mirror Microfiche Double AA Side*, 12-inch record (D.S. Al Coda #2, 2010). See: http://www.dsalcoda.org.

[35] Dexter Sinister, *True Mirror Microfiche* (video, 12 mins., 2010). This was first shown as part of the group exhibition *Critical Complicity*, Lungomare, Bolzano, Italy, 25–28 November, 2010.




J.D. Salinger, spine design for *Hapworth 16, 1924*, c. 1996

# 5: WORK IN MOVEMENT

In *The Open Work*, Eco often refers to 'work in movement'. The sense in which this means something distinct from 'open work' is never entirely clear, but my summary understanding is that where an open work cultivates multiple interpretations or ambiguous meanings (such as Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1917) or Antonioni's film *Eclipse* (1962), to give two of his examples), a work in movement involves some live, real-time aspect to convey a tangible sense of *working* from inside a flow of events (such as Calder's kinetic mobiles (c. 1930s) or John Cage's abstract scores (c. 1950s)). Here I'll more specifically articulate an approach to art and design that involves establishing a set of fundamental conditions or instructions for a piece of work to play out in this way: a program that runs a script.

'Sketch versus blueprint' begins by contrasting an agile, open-minded approach with a stubborn, blinkered one. 'Unscripted insight' notes how this requires *immersion* in the work at hand, in order to respond to circumstances in real-time without inhibitions or preconceptions. 'Applied art: running room' argues for work that resists lazy categorization, in order that a more agile, athletic (i.e. 'moving') work can occur outside the bounds of fashion or received wisdom. 'Mature instinct' alludes to the ability to identify and follow the course of an aesthetic idea, rather than either stopping short at a one-liner, or otherwise thrashing about aimlessly. 'Hardy perennials' is a close reading of two instances of slow-motion form-giving – the still-going-strong *New Yorker* magazine, and famously obstinate author J.D. Salinger. In different but commensurable ways they exemplify the positive consequences of the 'movement' I mean to draw out here: the particular and peculiar over the commonplace and bland.

Next, work in movement is equated with 'Thinking contingency', with extended reference to a recent exhibition and related book that suggest why this idea is timely and urgent in contemporary art and philosophy. 'The Mafia game: a matter of concern' is a not entirely serious response to Bruno Latour's call for new ways to represent highly contingent social, political and environmental issues – a means of modelling how to deal with perpetually moving targets. 'Vocal Registers: three films' suggests how three recent audiovisual works demonstrate all the above: each seems to have been made *on the fly*, supple enough to allow its language to adapt along the way and so end up appropriately skewed. And Richard Hamilton's triptych magazine piece 'Urbane Image' (1963) is offered up as an 'ur-example' that likewise grapples with a timely topic *on the topic's own terms* – an attempt to articulate a subject as directly as possible while prominently affected by it. The writing gets involved, inspired, goes awry, and in such a state registers something of the contemporary condition.

## 5.1: SKETCH VERSUS BLUEPRINT

In his 2009 book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett draws a useful comparison between the Villa Moller (1928), a late architectural project by Adolph Loos, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's near-contemporaneous house for his sister in the Kundmanngasse, Vienna (1929).[1] Sennett couches the story in terms of 'The Janus Face of Obsession' – positive in Loos's case, negative in Wittgenstein's. It's an especially instructive comparison because both advocated the progressive, utilitarian principles of Weimar Germany's *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which is to say the sort of formal sobriety and 'honesty' compressed into moral aesthetic maxims like 'form follows function' and 'truth to materials'. As such, he says, we can attribute the disparity in their work to temperamental differences rather than ideological ones.

Wittgenstein designed his sister's house (below left) as an exercise in ideal proportion, his ambition nothing less than to present 'the foundations of all possible buildings'. A crude reading might align such absolutism with his early axiomatic philosophy; indeed, the outcome is similarly severe, minimal, and mathematically minded: uniform sets of windows are placed in equidistant trios along the façade of the first three floors, for instance, while handles are positioned exactly halfway up window frames and on doors. The result is perfect and, in Sennett's opinion, perfectly lifeless.

[1] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). See pp. 252–67.



Wittgenstein later disowned his design, stating that although the house possessed ‘good manners’ it lacked primordial life. Sennett suggests that the house suffers from the unlimited budget afforded by the wealthy Wittgenstein family, and thus a total absence of useful constraints to which the design could respond. Because anything was possible, Wittgenstein’s vision of a generic, universal form could be realized down to the finest detail without compromise: the entire ceiling of one of the larger rooms was lowered by an inch as the project was nearing completion, for instance. Money suffocated the project.



Loos’s Villa Moller, on the other hand, was continually beset by problems – a stream of mistakes, accidents, impediments and other contingencies that had to be handled in the midst of construction, and with a limited budget. However, contrary to Wittgenstein’s dictatorial mania for perfection, says Sennett, Loos was willing to engage in ‘a dialogue with form and error’, and this is precisely what affords his house the life that Wittgenstein’s lacked. Sennett goes on to emphasize the crucial role of the sketch in Loos’s work in keeping things fluid and flexible – of ‘not knowing quite what you’re about to do when you begin’. This is not to say that Loos avoided any planning at all: ‘his experience prepared him for the *type-form*,’ writes Sennett, ‘but he went no further until he got on site.’

While Wittgenstein’s reference drawings were technically sophisticated, Loos’s informal sketches were of an entirely different order – ‘a working procedure for preventing *premature* closure.’[2] Loos spent considerable time sketching the play of light on the villa’s site at different times of day, then placed and sized windows accordingly, with the result that where the Kundmanngasse house was conceived as a set of discrete, self-contained rooms, the Villa Moller was reflexively designed to emphasize the passage *between* spaces.

Sennett therefore advocates Loos’s deliberately unresolved sketch over Wittgenstein’s ‘blueprint’ inasmuch as it allows a positive ‘measure of incompleteness’. He also notes the importance of knowing when to stop ‘at the moment when one is tempted to erase all traces of the work’s production in order to make it seem a pristine object’, because letting those traces show usefully points to the story of the

[2] Ibid., p. 262 (my italics).

making of the work.[3] Where an unhealthy obsession strangles its object, he concludes, a healthy, well-balanced one 'interrogates its own driving convictions'.

## 5.2: UNSCRIPTED INSIGHT

The U.S. literary radio host Michael Silverblatt once noted how he conscientiously avoids preparing questions before interviewing people in order to ensure that a dialogue can better develop 'a life of its own' by 'finding its own form'. In the following fragment, he gropes towards a description of how such a freewheeling approach manifests itself in form, and it's all the more persuasive for having been thought aloud during an on-air conversation itself, as he ends up describing not only a certain strain of postmodern fiction, but equally his own gradually meaningful mess of a sentence:

> To name the problem does not put the writer above the problem ... it locates the writer *in* the problem ... the problem becomes something like the tar baby.
>
> The writer gets caught both outside *and* inside ... or more inside than outside ... and the book seems like ... the recording of the process of trying to find an extrication point ... while suspecting there is none.
>
> This may be what I'm describing as mess, or beautiful mess.[4]

'When the work – or the conversation or any other human activity – is going well,' writes Robin Kinross, 'then you forget what time it is and whatever else you should be doing'[5] All the approaches referred to in the present chapter relate the same aim of total engagement – 'the bliss of immersion' – and consequent oneness with the work. They aim for a state *outside time* that ideally affords the outcome the same sense of timelessness, a.k.a. conviction. 'There is some quality in artefacts that is like this process', says Kinross; '[the work] presents itself to you in a very immediate and unavoidable way. But it seems *inevitable*. Its novelty isn't an issue. It isn't expressive, except of its own content.'[6]

John Cage once explained that experiment is necessarily a procedure without a preconceived end, because expectations automatically presuppose terms of success and failure.[7] The experimenting artist is therefore like a tourist in the best senses of the word: naive, curious, eager and unabashed. Cage is thinking specifically of music that directs attention towards many things at once, including environmental sounds; in other words, the sort of work that overflows our usual understanding of musical performance and so precludes easy categorization. Similarly, genuine conversation for him occurs only 'when the second thing that is said is not in the mind of who said the first thing.'[8]

Gilles Deleuze is often regarded as a philosopher of movement. In the 'P for Professor' section of *L'Abécédaire*, he discusses his work as a teacher.[9] In the first of many moments of unscripted insight, he describes the enormous amount of preparation required to 'get something into one's head' just

[3] Ibid., p. 258.

[4] See: http://www.dfwaudioproject.org/wp-content/uploads/interviews-profiles/Bookworm-Brief-Interviews-promo2.mp3. The 'tar baby' reference alludes to a parable in which an already sticky situation is made worse by struggling with it.

[5] Robin Kinross, 'More Light', *Monotype Typography: Quarter-point*, no. 3, 1993 (my italics).

[6] Ibid. See also the idea of 'organic' art in §1.4.

[7] See: John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 13.

[8] 'I think conversation works best when the second thing that is said is not in the mind of who said the first thing.' From: '19 Questions with John Cage', *The Complete John Cage Edition: vol. 30: From Zero*, DVD (Mode, 2004).

[9] See chapter 2, fn. 45.

enough – to a teetering degree of comprehension – to be able to convey it to a class with the sort of conviction and inspiration that is only conjured through live realization. This preparatory work is like a rehearsal for a performance, he says – a planned improvisation. If the speaker doesn't find what he's saying of interest himself, no one else will. The ideal is to learn something while conveying it, though this shouldn't be mistaken for vanity: it's not a case of finding *oneself* passionate and interesting, he says, only the subject matter.

Deleuze frequently champions the dynamic and transient, in line with his commitment to philosophy as a fundamentally *active* vocation. The job of the philosopher, he says, is to develop concepts not in view of *establishing* them, in which case they would become something as definite and ordinary as a school (in fact he denounces Wittgenstein's followers as an especially staunch and humourless bunch), but in order to perpetually circulate and develop them – manipulated, refined, refuted, altered, supplanted and overturned by a potentially endless succession of subsequent interests and talents. Deleuze's own concepts are famously promiscuous, widely applied in many different fields. In *L'Abécédaire* he recalls enthusiastic correspondence from groups as diverse as paper-folders and surfers in response to his work on the concept of 'the fold'.

Deleuze and Guattari say that where philosophy elucidates concepts, art coaxes *sensations* – a category that breaks down further into *perceptions* (of objects and states) and *feelings* (of the transition from one state to another).[10] 'Percepts' and 'affects' are instances of perceptions and feelings wrested from an artist's experience and compounded in 'blocs' of sensations to rouse equivalent perceptions and feelings in an audience. The artwork, then, ideally *assimilates* its subject matter in order to make a durable recording of a dynamic experience – and like Deleuze's industrious teacher, gets duly *animated* in the process. (It's no coincidence that aesthetic experiences are often positively described as moving or transporting.)

Art therefore forges a kind of aesthetic empathy: the object-of-capture and the artwork-that-captures-it possess not identical but commensurate idiosyncrasies. In effect, the work 'does the seeing':

> What matters is not, as in bad novels, the opinions held by characters in accordance with their social type and characteristics, but rather the relations of counterpoint into which they enter and the compounds of sensations that these characters either themselves experience or make felt in their becomings and their visions.[11]

## 5.3: APPLIED ART: RUNNING ROOM

This section is recalled from a short talk given by Dexter Sinister at an art and design school in Vancouver, 2010.[12]

### How has the term 'Applied Art' been applied to art?

In 1973, MIT Press published the first of now some 30-odd printings of Donis A. Dondis's *A Primer of Visual Literacy*,[13] an update of the Bauhaus foundation course published on the cusp of the computer age and marked by the influence of semiotics. Among its lessons is a brief one in relativism: three diagrams here trace the shifts in the perception of the standard arts disciplines according to the denominations 'Fine' and 'Applied'.

[10] See: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Percept, Affect, and Concept', *What is Philosophy?* [1991, French] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[11] Ibid., p. 188.

[12] Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, 28 January, 2010.

[13] Donis A. Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), p. 4.

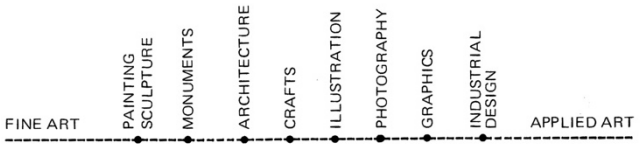



FIGURE 1.1

Such a diagram would look quite different were it to represent another culture, such as the Pre-Renaissance (1.2),




FIGURE 1.2

or the "Bauhaus" point of view, which would group any and all of the fine and applied arts on one central point in the continuum (1.3).

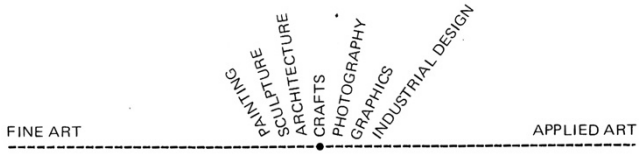



FIGURE 1.3

While it might at first seem plain to assume that 'Fine' refers to academic, abstract, aesthetic and intellectual ends, while 'Applied' points to more industrial, material, functional, useful ones, these diagrams show that such a binary classification (and, by implication, class) system is, over time, hardly watertight. Just look at painting's lateral drift from right to left, for instance: it's not *inherently* imbued with either beauty or use; rather, these qualities are *attributed* according to the cultural conventions of the era. With this in mind, how might we productively re-apply the term 'Applied Art' today?

In his 1962 book *The Shape of Time*, Mesoamericanist and art historian George Kubler proposed a model that broke apart and reconstituted the prevailing compartmentalization of the arts.[14] Kubler considered art less a symbolic language than a system of formal relations that follow each other over time. He proposed a realignment of art history gathered around parallel streams of formal problems from different times and different disciplines, rather than the chronological one-upmanship that typified his field. Art history, he suggested, proceeds in fits and starts, loops and simultaneous streams – 'more knot than arrow' – and Kubler's re-ordering also flattened typical distinctions between the Fine and Applied arts, calling to replace the regular distinctions of Useless (= art) and Useful (= design) with those of Desirable (= objects that last) and Non-desirable (= objects that don't).

Bruno Munari already spanned a number of disciplines – including (at least) graphics, industrial design, painting, sculpture and photography – when he wrote *Design as Art* in 1966.[15] In one of a series of short articles written for an Italian newspaper, Munari made a polemical call for artists to 'cast off the last rags of romanticism' and work as designers, meaning directly within society rather than art's corollary fantasy space; the artist ought to be 'prepared to make a sign for a butcher's shop (if he knows how to do it).'[16] In Munari's view, accountability and humility trump aura and pretension. He reminds his readers that an Etruscan vase, today admired on a pedestal in a gentleman's home, was originally designed as a vessel for carrying and storing olive oil.

[14] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the history of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

[15] Bruno Munari, *Design as Art* [1962, Italian] (London: Penguin, 2009).

[16] Ibid., p. 25.

Working parallel to the Vienna Secession, Adolf Loos published his famous diatribe 'Ornament and Crime' in 1908, attacking the decadence of Art Nouveau's florid forms and applications, particularly its collective emphasis on the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[17] In an earlier allegory, Loos portrayed a 'poor little rich man' who commissioned an artist to decorate and furnish his entire house in the Art Nouveau style. Once this total environment was complete, according to Loos, the patron was 'shut out of future life and its strivings, its developments, and its desires.' The effect was suffocating, without what Loos's friend Karl Kraus called 'running-room' – the space for development, improvement, or change opened up by imperfection, incompleteness, inconsistency, or ambiguity. Instead, Loos proclaims, 'He is finished! *He is complete!*'[18]

A century or so later in 2002, Hal Foster updated Loos's critique in his book *Design and Crime*, asserting that contemporary Western culture (having supplanted Loos's bourgeois patron) is now burdened by a totality of design.[19] All aspects of the cultural landscape – from surfaces to institutions to lifestyles, and so on – have been designed, redesigned, considered, reconsidered and thoroughly mediated. As a result, the modern citizen has been designed to *within an inch of his life*, enveloped by this totalizing design with almost no 'running-room.' In this densely realized world, Foster, following Loos, calls for some room to live and breathe, and his book goes on to describe and promote practices that take a crowbar to this in-between space, loosening up the cracks between suffocating categories.

Produced in the early 1960s, Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Minus Objects* were a collection of works that had no discernible connection to each other beyond their collective title. They were made from different materials, at different scales, and articulated a variety of interests and themes.[20] According to Pistoletto, the only constant is that each one represents a unique idea developed to its logical conclusion, made so deliberately and properly manifest, without surplus or superfluousness, to preclude ever having to make it again or pursue the idea any further. This is the sense in which Pistoletto considered them 'minus': their production was such a definite realization that the idea was then effectively liberated from the realm of possibility, and therefore (for him at least) a release rather than a product, a subtraction rather than an addition.



The Minus Objects were originally shown crowded into the modest space of Pistoletto's studio, exaggerating the limited amount of room left for visitors, who were forced to circulate in the gaps between. Pistoletto emphasized in his writing of the time that objects create restrictions and pathways that limit and direct our paths through the world, both literally and symbolically. He says simply that the only space to move in the world is that which remains between objects. Further, the Minus Objects' lack of formal consistency and institutional framing together renders them slippery, difficult to grasp, place, or reduce to an easy label – an ambiguity that compounds by their dual status as props and metaphors, at once functional and poetic.

[17] Adolf Loos, 'Ornament and Crime' [1908, German] in Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970).

[18] Adolf Loos, 'The Poor Little Rich Man' [1900, German] in *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897–1900* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

[19] Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002).

[20] See also §1.7.

Take one of the Minus Objects, the *Structure for Talking White Standing*. Exhibited in 1966, first in the studio and later in galleries and museums without any *particular* conversation or context in mind, the object is evidently gestural – a *pointer*, a tool for contemplating the *idea* of conversation (or, more generally, social interaction). But it's also equally functional, in the sense that it is simply a frame on which anyone in the studio, gallery or museum *can* simply lean and have a chat. The purpose of the object oscillates between these two poles of gesture and function – which is to say between the orthodox distinctions of design and art. Thus the structure highlights the negative space between the two and, in the process, opens up a precious bit of running room.

## 5.4: MATURE INSTINCT

The idea that a piece of work can possess its own intrinsic 'logic' or 'law' was made clearer to me in conversation with artist Dave Hullfish Bailey. We were bemoaning the sorts of ambiguous claims made by art students in lieu of straightforwardly recounting the decisions that have influenced the form of their work – along the lines of it *just feeling right*, instinctively and inexplicably. More specifically (and awkwardly), we wondered why such responses seem so lazy and unacceptable when this supposedly instinctive, inexplicable state is precisely what we're chasing in our own work, i.e. those moments when stuff begins to curiously cohere and convince though the reasons why are, for the time being at least, obscure. Was it possible to vindicate this double standard, or were we just being arrogant?

The teacher/student premise implies a distinction between what we could think of as mature and immature instinct. Dave put it this way: immature work is characterized by apparently arbitrary choices that, to the proxy audience that an art mentor represents, don't 'make sense' or 'stand up' or 'speak for themselves' or 'gel', while the mature counterpart simultaneously forges and reveals its logic, its intelligibility – *the sense in which it makes sense* – along the way. This logic can be pursued with more or less fidelity, which in turn yields more or less convincing work.

Otherwise put, the choices apparent in our supposedly mature work are not at all arbitrary but *pointed*; hence the transition from art student to working artist (so to speak) implies the development of the ability to first apprehend, then properly follow the bait of aesthetic instinct.[21] Naturally, this is not *necessarily* about the difference between immature students and mature teachers, only the gap between sterile and resonant work. Following Nietszche's famous imperative (in *The Gay Science*) to 'become what you are', how to help an idea become what it is – to find a form that fits?

Another artist/teacher friend, Sharon Kahanoff, told me an illuminating story about one of her students. The student was in the process of making a film that she (Sharon, not the student) described as being 'like a really bad version of *The Blair Witch Project*' – shorthand for an emphatically anxious, vaguely gothic film. Part of the plan involved filming with an infrared camera along a particular stretch of road at night in an attempt to capture a sense of apprehension and fear. It's easy enough to imagine the scene – and this was precisely Sharon's point; that the sequence was so resolved in advance that it precluded the possibility of coaxing or registering any *un*scripted events – which implies she was too blinkered to appreciate their value. Suffice to say, this early footage visibly lacked life.

During the filming of a later scene, however, the same student busy filming at night along an equally premeditated route suddenly realizes she'll need to pass through a notoriously dangerous tunnel under a broad bridge she'd apparently overlooked; and according to Sharon, the moment she enters this tunnel, the footage palpably registers her *actual* anxiety as she subtly reacts and recoils. Basically, the camera captures a few moments of real fear. To use Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the effect yields the sort of *affect* (feeling, emotion) that was patently lacking before. This is exactly what Eco's getting at when he describes form as a way of thinking – in this case, a means of advancing in the dark.

[21] This aligns with Pareyson's biological metaphor of art as organism, in which the germ of an idea is 'nurtured' to the point at which it becomes self-generating. See §1.4.

Newly aware of this gap between artificial and actual fear, the question becomes: how to achieve the same power for the duration? How to harness the surprise? Shoot backwards and reverse the footage? In an unknown location? With an inexperienced crew? Blindfold? Reconfigure the work entirely on the basis of the 'real' rupture? In any case, this inadvertently effective bit of video is the seed of the so-called logic or law of this particular work I'm suggesting might be profitably pursued by an adequately alert – mature – instinct.

Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of 'vestige' in his book *The Muses* describes the student's moment in the tunnel as *the trace of a cause*. This isn't quite the same as either an image of the cause, or of the cause's effect. Nancy elaborates with two simple examples: the smoke of a cigarette, and the footprint of a shoe. Both are clear traces of the *causes* of specific actions, or *actions made latent*, i.e able to be perceived, or re-conceived, but only by indirect means. And because an essential aspect of any trace is that it's a step removed, always in the process of evaporating or dissipating or fading, it can never be wholly grasped (fixed, domesticated, reified, neutered). Essentially and elliptically, I think he's saying that this 'vestige' of art *is* art.

In the first number of the magazine *BLAST* (1914), chief Vorticist Wyndham Lewis wrote that the power of art lay in its evanescent, *fleeting* aspect – its 'glorious contingency'.[22] He further noted how the most perishable colours in painting are the most brilliant, so that which burns brightest burns most briefly. And in an essay that draws a line between Lewis, Marx, Benjamin, Adorno, the Sex Pistols, children's comics and Day-Glo paint, cultural critics Esther Leslie and Ben Watson assert that 'in true modernist fashion brilliance must be but fleeting, timely, not eternal, a coincidence of moment, viewer and object.'[23] Hence the power of Nancy's vestige-as-art lies in the fact that it's *merely* a vestige – a momentary, glancing side-effect (like a sunspot).

Bruno Latour's early work *Irreductions*, a sort of autobiographical-metaphysical manifesto, is written in the form of a series of branching axioms (possibly in homage and/or a pisstake of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*).[24] The opening axiom and its attendant footnote are as follows:

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1. Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything
else.*

* I will call this the 'principle of irreducibility', but it is a
prince that does not govern since that would be a contradiction.
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It's the footnote I really like: *a prince-iple that doesn't govern!* – an ethos that resists hardening into ideology. The snake-eating-its-own-tail form of the sentiment embodies its meaning *and* admits its limits. This fleeting one-liner is about the most convincing instance I've come across of the nature of work in movement I'm after grasping.

## 5.5: HARDY PERENNIALS

What follows is a lightly reworked version of a talk in two halves originally presented at Yale Union, an independent arts institute in Portland, Oregon, during an exhibition of seminal cartoonist and illustrator Saul Steinberg's work for *The New Yorker* magazine.[25] The show consisted entirely of back issues of the magazine, thus presenting Steinberg's work in its natural habitat, a curatorial conceit that

[22] Wyndham Lewis, ed., *BLAST: Review of the Great English Vortex* [1914] (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997).

[23] Esther Leslie and Ben Watson, 'Comic Marxism: Punk's Day Glo and The Bash Street Kids', *Dot Dot Dot* #11, 2006. The reference is to Lewis's essay 'Futurism, Magic and Life' in *BLAST* (ibid., p. 30).

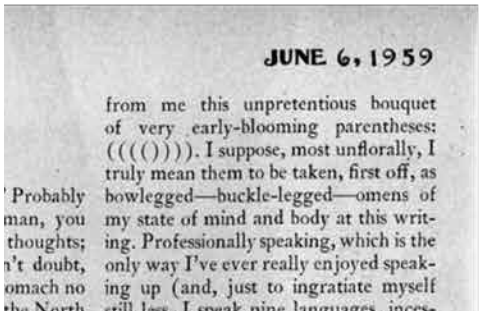
[24] *Irreductions* is published as an appendix to: Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* [1984, French] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[25] *STEINBERG, SAUL. THE NEW YORKER. NEW YORK, 1945–2000 (HAROLD, WILLIAM, ROBERT, TINA, DAVID, EDS.),* Yale Union, Portland, OR, 16 June – 10 August, 2012.

cannily avoided turning Steinberg's drawings – drawn to be published in print-runs of many hundreds of thousands – into precious art. The show's format also quietly forwarded the idea that the medium – the carrier – is as telling as the drawings themselves. 'Everything has a message', Steinberg noted; 'The circulatory system has a message, the page has a message, the ads have a message, the neighbourhood of fiction and news have a message, all of it makes for juxtapositions as eerily apposite as anything the French surrealists or a blender could come up with.' The talk was concerned not with Steinberg, however, but with two other New York institutions that, I argue, carry the same sort of conviction as Steinberg's work, and for the same reasons.



SEYMOUR
AN INTRODUCTION



JUNE 6, 1959

from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-blooming parentheses: ((((()))). I suppose, most unflorally, I truly mean them to be taken, first off, as bowlegged—buckle-legged—omens of my state of mind and body at this writing. Professionally speaking, which is the only way I've ever really enjoyed speaking up (and, just to ingratiate myself

Probably
man, you
thoughts;
't doubt,
omach no

From June 6th, 1959, this single page auspiciously touches all points of the triangle of my talk – *The New Yorker* itself, J.D. Salinger (whose novella *Seymour: An Introduction* first appeared here), and Saul Steinberg (whose drawing happens to grace the same page). At the top of the third column, Salinger nicely offers up a bouquet of parentheses – prescient for me, as I actually want to put Steinberg in brackets for the rest of the talk, not unlike his own parenthetical man at the foot of the page. That's to say, this evening I want to shift him from the fronts to the backs of your minds, because while I'm not going to say anything about Steinberg himself, I'm hoping it'll become clear how what I do want to talk about – slowness, steadfastness, longevity, and most of all, refinement – easily apply to Steinberg too.

*The New Yorker*, Salinger, and Steinberg are also related in the sense that they're all distinctly New York institutions – another useful baton for me, as I mainly want to talk about how the graphic design of both the magazine and Salinger's book covers became *positively institutionalized*. Obviously, institutions are generally synonymous with the kinds of bureaucracy and bigness that tend to suck rather than perpetuate life – or lively work. And so when I say positively institutionalized, I don't mean 'positive' as some passive filler, but as an active qualifier. In other words, my two subjects are unusually good institutions, something to aspire to.

I've been told me that the germ of the idea for the exhibition here began to incubate already a couple of years ago, and that the time taken to realize it since was 'just right' – not too quick and not too slow, more a kind of percolating process. This seems an unusually correct way of going about things these days, and all the more reason to draw attention to it. The way of working, I mean. Not out of self-congratulation or self-reflexivity, more as a reminder that this is how good work happens.

I want to suggest, then, that the formal outcome of this right-amount-of-time-taken is marked above all by *inevitability* – the feeling that it couldn't be any other way. It's convincing, which is to say beautiful, which is to say resolved in precisely the sense I want to get at in this talk, and also precisely because of the *reasons* I want to get at in this talk. As such, the usual relation is reversed: rather than this talk serving to introduce the show, the show is a proof of what I'm about to say.

**(a) Always the same, always different**

Some years ago, I was invited to write a paragraph about my favourite magazine designs. After drawing a total blank, I concluded that this came down to something I've been repeating for so long that it's become a kind of mantra (or maybe a prayer): *Design is a verb not a noun.* The question 'What are your favourite magazine designs?', though, is clearly based on the inverse premise. Rather than the ways in which things get made (ways of working, approaches, attitudes) the invitation asks for a list of things themselves (results, objects, products), and so it's anathema to my way of conceiving design.

But there's a way to reverse – or parallel park – into the question, which is to point to those magazines that seem to capture those so-called 'ways of thinking' more emphatically than most, those whose editorial character is ingrained and palpable. The immediate examples that spring to mind are certain familiar, stalwart and, as it happens, frequently New York-based publications: *Harper's Weekly*, *Time*, *Time Out*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New Yorker*. All of which are getting on a bit in magazine years, and this is precisely the point: to an unusual degree they've been *designed by time*; that is, refined through a slow, sculptural process that involves hordes of individuals passing through the publication over an extended period, tinkering and modifying within strictly guarded limits.

In an industry marked by incessant redesign and ersatz improvement, and with a high turnaround of personnel often more intent on asserting their own personalities in the short-term than perpetuating an imprint's personality in the long run, such slow, organic evolution is the exception rather than the rule. And to my mind it's *The New Yorker*, above all, that manifests the benefits of such caution, having maintained a virtually unchanged editorial format for what's now approaching 90 years.

The magazine was founded in 1925 by Harold Ross, an ex-newspaper man. He'd done his homework, and from the outset had a clear notion of the *sort* of thing he intended to put out: a distinctly local, sophisticated humour journal, in which the humour was 'actually funny'. At the same time he had little idea how to flesh out such a broad sketch – no real precedent to speak of, and no ready pool of contributors beyond a few members of a few small literary circles, particularly the Algonquin Round Table, most of whom already wrote for other magazines.

More than anyone else, it was another member of Ross's circle, self-titled 'art consultant' Rea Irvin, who was responsible for the way the first issue looked, and so to a remarkable degree for the way it looks today. It was Irvin who created and christened, for instance, that inimitable cover mascot Eustace Tilley. Variously remodelled, Tilley still fronts each year's anniversary issue and presides weekly over the gossip section that was initially called 'Of All Things' and latterly 'Talk of the Town'. He also drew that distinctive headline font (since mechanized, digitized, and now known simply as Irvin type), and set those familiar two or three columns of text per page, dense and economical yet still highly legible.

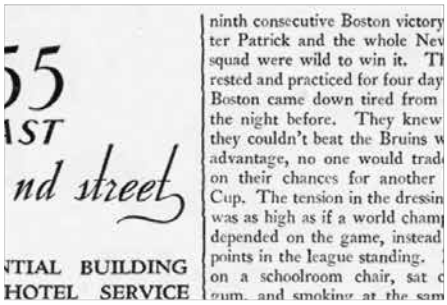






But pulling *The New Yorker*'s graphic devices apart from its editorial approach in this way seems fundamentally wrong. What is editing, exactly? Deciding what to include, and how to include it; and

at *The New Yorker*, verbal and visual aspects were always unusually symbiotic, which is to say mutually supportive. Here are two quick examples. At some point fairly early on, Ross complained that Irvin's text pages were 'too loose', needed 'tightening up', and proposed adding vertical rules between columns. He rejected Irvin's first sample rule for being 'too straight' – too rigid, too formal, not irregular enough; so Irvin returned to the drawing board in search of an adequately decadent replacement, and only after some days came back with a concrete line that matched the abstract one in Ross's head. It remains intact today, if now horizontal.







Conversely, Irvin played a significant part in the evolution of the classic *New Yorker* cartoon – arguably the magazine's most distinctive innovation – by establishing that spoken captions be set both italicized and in quotation marks. This double emphasis afforded punchlines a sense of pronounced immediacy, as if capturing a split-second, that made the previous convention – out of quotes and in plain roman type – seem stilted by comparison.







These two apparently minor details – a casual dividing line and an emphasized punch-line, a graphic change instigated by the editor-in-chief and a verbal one instigated by the art director – are typical of the attention to detail, equally focused on meaning and feeling.

The magazine advanced by such instinctive trial-and-error, a small committed core of New Yorkers floating between departments and roles, flailing towards something that didn't yet exist – a compound identity no-one could quite put their finger on. By its own estimation, the magazine had a far stronger grip on what it wasn't than what it was, a tendency marked by the self-reflexive tic of referring to itself in its own pages. One writer psychoanalyzed this tendency as amounting to 'hanging up a series of mirrors in the hallway of the magazine's childhood … hoping to catch from time to time an accurate and becoming reflection.' Precisely: busy trying to perceive what it was in the process of becoming.

In a favourite typographic exchange, the German artist Kurt Schwitters declared: 'Innumerable laws may be written. The most important is: never make it as someone before you did.' To which the English typographer Anthony Froshaug responded: 'Schwitters is quite wrong. Make it *as* they did, unless the constraints are changed.' He went on: 'When constraints change, the important thing is not to spray a random pattern across the page, but to assess the old, with the new, requirements.'

It's important not to take Froshaug's reaction as reactionary. If you dwell on this statement closely (say, for about 18 years, as I have) you might come to realize the following points. First, that constraints, or circumstances, are rarely, if ever, exactly the same. Second, that all language, verbal or graphic, is by definition based on what someone before you did – on conventions. Meaning is necessarily shared.

And third, that Froshaug is therefore simply – and complexly – making a case against novelty for its own sake, but absolutely for clear and lively communication. He would have liked *The New Yorker.*

Here's an apparently restrained memo from the editor responding to some proposed change or other:

> I think it would be a foolish mistake, would violently impair the whole personality of the magazine. I don't think there is any argument in favour of it whatsoever ... My definite conviction is this: the format of the New Yorker is all right; it's been adequately proven all right by several years of signal success. All attempts to 'high power' the magazine ought to be kicked in the teeth.[26]

It would be wrong, too, to read Ross's attitude – ethos, really – as mere conservatism. He's by no means anachronistic or luddite. On the contrary, I'd say his stubborn decorum is quietly subversive. In refusing to bow to fashion, industry convention, or the whims or demands of readers, advertisers, and distributors, his editorial integrity is radical in the deeper sense related in these lines from *Dispersion*, an essay-artwork by New York artist Seth Price:

> An argument against art that addresses contemporary issues and topical culture rests on the virtue of slowness, often cast aside due to the urgency with which one's work must appear. Slowness works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements: it's a resistance to the contemporary mandate of speed. Moving with the times places you in a blind spot: if you're part of the general tenor, it's difficult to add a dissonant note.[27]

Note that this isn't against speed per se, only the mandate of speed imposed by others. Harold Ross was a staunch man, described by one of his staff as 'constitutionally resistant to change'. But he generally had good reasons to remain so. Until 1992, for instance, writers were named only at the ends of their texts, and the reasons were entirely pragmatic. For starters, few articles were more than a page long, so the author's name was anyway easily found. More interestingly, most of the early writers were moonlighting, and had to sign their work with clandestine initials or pseudonyms. In those earlier, slimmer years, Ross was also reportedly embarrassed by the number of pieces written by the same people in a single issue, and preferred to hide the fact. For similar reasons the magazine managed to get by without a table of contents until 1969.

As *The New Yorker* gathered longer articles and a reputation, its own stable of writers became more than happy to be credited. But even though Ross's sound, if somewhat neurotic, reasons to downplay individuals gradually dissipated, he chose to maintain the convention of names at the end for a new, emerging reason: the anonymity served to establish a first person plural, a 'we' that was not only a cipher for a collective editorial, but for New Yorkers generally – a demographic flattered by association with the magazine's gathering sophistication. And so Ross thought it prudent to push the notion that, in a vague but pervasive way, *The New Yorker* was made not only for but also *by* its readers.

It might sound counterintuitive, but it seems that the relative fixity of the magazine's structure allowed for the relative chaos of its burgeoning content, and that Ross's and Irvin's founding decisions were less important than the fact that they rigorously maintained them. In this way, *The New Yorker* was allowed to 'become itself' – to grow into its fancy dress. The content was not simply forced to fit the form. While Ross saw that sticking within confines was completely productive, a decent compost in which to flourish, he was equally adamant that the writing always came first. In most magazines, contributions are written or cut to lengths dictated by the format. Not so at *The New Yorker*, where layouts are preferably reworked or pages added – often to extreme extents. 'When I started this

[26] Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), pp. 42–3.

[27] Seth Price, 'Dispersion', op. cit. (unpaginated).

magazine,' Ross wrote, 'I didn't allow an art editor within three blocks of the premises and gave the type the right of way.'

This is typical: in accounting for the editorial essence of *The New Yorker*, I paradoxically bounce from applauding its restrictions and conventions, to equally applauding its openness and elasticity. Which leads me to think that the *real* point to be made is how the magazine's singular verve isn't the result of one or the other, but an active synthesis of the two, the simultaneously careful and haphazard negotiation of freedom and order. In short, *The New Yorker* displays the defining quality of any decent magazine: that it's essentially a plastic medium.

This patient, barely perceptible development continued through the tenure of Ross's equally legendary and equally steadfast successor William Shawn. The magazine's first and only real rupture came as late as the early 1990s, following the appointment of Tina Brown, a 38-year-old Englishwoman fresh from a successful revamp of *Vanity Fair*. Brown refurnished the magazine with unabashed populism: gossip, money, power, profanity, and celebrity (Roseanne Barr was invited to guest-edit an issue), all of which met with the sort of indignation and resistance you might expect from the older school of readers and writers.

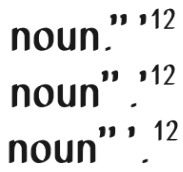
Despite Brown's controversial direction, the immediacy and extent of which was of course absolutely alien to the magazine's regular crawl, when current editor David Remnick took over six years later, consensus opinion suggests he swung the magazine back to its relatively staid equilibrium, though he also maintained many of Brown's innovations including colour photography and edgier illustration. If you compare this week's issue with the original 1925 one, though, the similarities remain far more striking than the differences.

At this point, some 90 years after Ross set it up, *The New Yorker* is an extremely well oiled machine; one that's instituted its own set of standards and an internal sense of proportion. The hardline is such that when a reader comes across something like this page from a sci-fi special issue a couple of weeks ago, with a circumscribing box, sanserif (i.e. sans-Irwin) type, and more white space than normal at top and tail, what would amount to a minor move for any other magazine seems comparatively seismic in *The New Yorker*. It's surprisingly surprising, and I like to think that this fosters a sensitivity to subtlety.


OLDS ROCKET 88, 1950

SCI-FI

As a typographer, one of the more enduring lessons I ever absorbed came out of a discussion with an exacting teacher of mine called Paul Stiff. We were talking at the level of micro-typesetting, specifically about the proper way to order and space the various pieces of punctuation in a sentence that ended with a quotation within a larger quotation that was then footnoted:




Clearly the issue not as straightforward as it might initially seem. Apart from considering the differences in British and American standards, which prioritize linguistic and aesthetic sense respectively, further decisions involve more slippery conventions, plus the possibility of manual spacing to tighten the whole thing up. Basically, there's a whole microcosm of possibility down there. Paul's point was that if you can make sound judgements at this level of detail, the same sensibility can be transposed to a broader scale, in terms of what we might more grandly call 'composition'. To repeat an adage that the later Zen-Buddhist Salinger would probably agree with, this kind of learning involves seeing rather than looking, otherwise known as insight.

This brings to mind a cluster of notes by architect Rem Koolhaas – from the book titled *S, M, L, XL*, aptly enough – that record his first impressions of meetings in Japan. It's written as a sort of long-form haiku that nicely performs the precision he's in the process of absorbing from his hosts:

> We had been 6 times to Japan
> each time for 7 days;
> each day we had 'meetings':
> 25 people together from 8 A.M. to 10 P.M.;
> at each meeting: 200–400 points.
> #1: please choose between 2 greys
> for the bathroom;
> #113: foundations don't work.[28]

To Koolhaas's (Western) sensibility, this sequence – in which they discuss the choice of decorative bathroom tiles before sorting out the building's foundations – is absurdly out of whack, and he wonders whether this betrays either a Japanese inability to define hierarchy (a disturbing lack of proportion or pragmatism), or is perhaps a deliberate strategy to keep foreigners on their toes. Then he registers a third, more exciting hypothesis: that for his Japanese colleagues no point is ever unimportant. This, he muses, would explain the bewildering, frequently maddening attention to detail and, by extension, the unusual density of quality in Japanese building. No single decision is considered any more important than any other: god is in the details *and* the superstructure.

*The New Yorker* is jam-packed with these kinds of lessons at all levels: the benefits of its eccentric orthography (like those notorious umlauts used to distinguish twin vowels: 'reëvaluate'); how to fit so many words within such a thin column with so little hyphenation; the easy articulation of its complex listings sections; and on up to the eminently foldable, roll-able, pocket-able, durable paper. In all these cases, consider how easy they are to use, then comprehend why. Such careful details populate countless other publications too, of course, but again, *The New Yorker* is exemplary because of its unusual degree of consistency. As DJ John Peel used to say about postpunk stalwarts The Fall, it's 'always the same, always different.' Robin Kinross put it like this: 'The mannerisms are apparent but they don't stay still.'[29]

**(b) When cantankerous attitude becomes form**

Curiously enough, the novelist J.D. Salinger was outspoken on the subject of graphic design, and his antagonism was formative to my own ambivalence. From the point of view of an angry young man, his

[28] Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

[29] Robin Kinross, 'Let the Object *Speak'*, *Eye*, no. 11, Winter 1993.

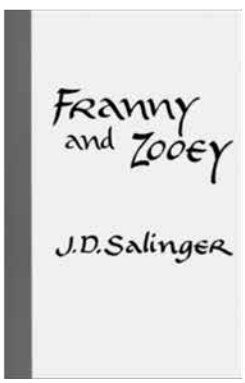
was always a usefully offset vantage – that of an unusually invested author who was (via the bitter mouthpiece of Holden Caulfield) famously against 'phoniness' in all its forms. This remains a fairly good euphemism for much that operates under the name 'graphic design' these days.

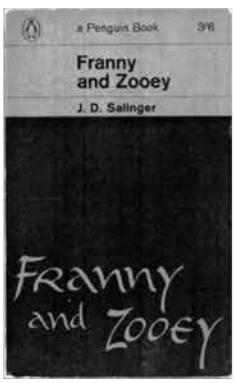
In the wake of the success of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951 – which is to say, once he'd acquired a certain clout in the publishing world – Salinger issued a caveat in his contracts that forbade illustrations to be used on the covers of his books. In effect, he was making sure to limit the amount of damage graphic design, then in the process of shapeshifting into 'marketing', could do.



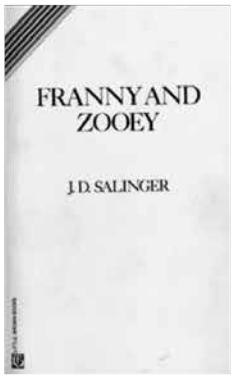

The particular instance that supposedly triggered Salinger's rancour was a fantastically inappropriate cover drawn for a collection of short stories titled after one of them, *For Esmé – with Love and Squalor*. The Esmé in question is, typically for Salinger, a gifted prepubescent, whose kindly conversation redeems a soldier on the verge of a nervous breakdown during the Second World War. The illustration on the front of this edition, however, stylistically reduces the book to pure pulp, its suggestiveness – of 'a painful, pitiable gallery of men, women, adolescents and children' – far removed from Salinger's tender heroine, to say the least.

Here's a clear and unusually exaggerated case, then, of a form that, while admittedly following its commercial function, is clearly way out of line with its content. To use a term I'll come back to later, it's equivocal, in the sense of being non-specific: the same style could be readily applied to different instances, as a clip-on part. This Esmé is, then, clearly an imposter … a case of false identity.
A contrary *un*equivocal form, on the other hand, would correspond to that sense of inevitability I mentioned earlier: conclusive, plausible, and hard to imagine otherwise. I'm not suggesting that the seductive, marketed Esmé here is irrelevant (she's well made-up to sell books, after all), only irresponsible. The numerous editions of Salinger's work published since his forbidding clause include some lively responses, such as the oddball calligraphy of this early American volume, or this subsequent Penguin edition, which manages to stick within the rules of their seminal series design by 'quoting' the former lettering, effectively turning it into an image and so in accord with their aesthetic policy.




None are more in tune with Salinger's attitude, though, than this set of covers, published by Little, Brown, and happily still in print.




I like to imagine that Salinger himself was responsible for these editions, though obviously I don't think that he literally prepared the artwork or wrote a brief, only that they correspond entirely with the sensibility of his prose. That's to say, the Little, Brown books seem inevitable: a family of modest, diminutive paperbacks typeset without pretension or fancy, with an uncoated card cover only slightly stiffer than its light-as-a-feather interior, which makes them easy to pocket and cheap to mail; the title and author in unaffected, unspaced capitals; and literally cutting across such austerity, that still-surprising abstract rainbow at top left. All seems fully consonant with the maverick Zen philosophy Salinger was working out in and through his later fiction.

It's useful to pause here and quickly summarize Salinger's bio- and bibliography. After attending various colleges in and around New York, then an apparently traumatic stint in the War, Salinger began publishing short pieces in the higher-brow society and literary magazines of the day. His first piece published in *The New Yorker* was 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish' in 1948. *The Catcher in the Rye*, his only proper novel, was published three years later to immediate success, followed by only three more books in his lifetime: *Nine Stories* (the alternate title of *For Esmé* ) in 1953, *Franny and Zooey* in 1961, and another double bill, *Raise High the Roof Beams, Carpenters, and Seymour: an Introduction* in 1963. All of which were assembled from stories previously published in (and in a couple of cases, rejected by) *The New Yorker*. They became increasingly, and in the end exclusively, concerned with chronicling the Glass family, an Irish-Jewish pack of supernaturally gifted and singularly precocious siblings – particularly its eldest brother, sage, seer, mystic, and suicide, Seymour, who shoots himself in the head in the last line of 'Bananafish', along with his younger brother Buddy, the family's happily secluded nominal biographer.

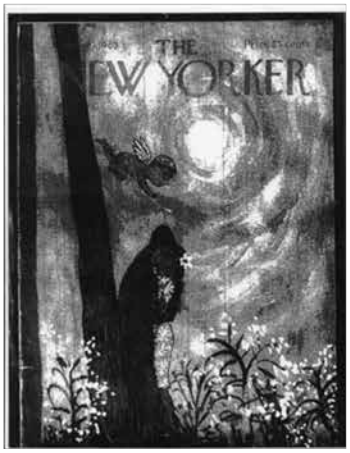
In 1953, in the wake of the attention lavished on *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger withdrew from public view, then spent the remainder of his life isolated, like Buddy, in rural New Hampshire, due north of New York. Persistent rumours claimed he was writing further Glass episodes with no particular intention to release them. What remains his last published story, 'Hapworth 16, 1924', was published in *The New Yorker* on June 19, 1965. In fictional chronological time, however, this is actually the first installment of the Glass saga, in the form of a 26,000-word letter sent home from summer camp by an insanely literary – and perhaps literally insane – seven-year old Seymour. The story takes up most of the issue, running over some 80 pages. Unlike Salinger's other *New Yorker* pieces, though, it was never turned into a book, most likely because it met with an embarrassed silence, generally deemed a conceit too far along the obtuse, mystical trajectory his stories had followed since he was first published in the magazine. It was taken as evidence that Salinger was 'on his way to hell in a handbasket', as one of many critics put it.

When I first came to New York in 2005 there were two let's say 'official' ways to read 'Hapworth'. First, by acquiring a copy of the original issue, which was by this time, some 40 years after publication, selling upwards of $400, despite the magazine's massive circulation at the time. (It must've been around the 400,000 mark in 1965; it's currently just over a million.) Or otherwise by finding an archived copy either bound in volumes or recorded on microfilm at a well-stocked public library – though reportedly, pages 32–118 have been ripped out of many library copies.

You could of course try to get hold of a second-hand duplication of either, but even these weren't easy to come by. 'Hapworth' was also conspicuously absent on the burgeoning internet when I began

searching in earnest back then, presumably due to Salinger's notorious vigilance. Years earlier, he had won a protracted court case against a British biographer, Ian Hamilton, that resulted in Hamilton's book being cut to around half its original length and so a shadow of its former self. Basically, Salinger was someone whose copyright was taken very seriously.



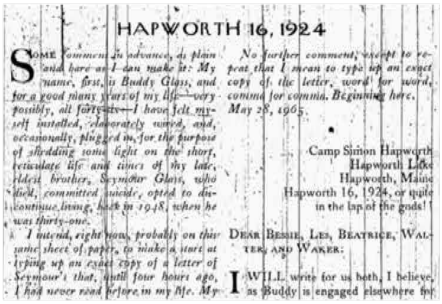




So one of the first things I did on moving to New York was pay a visit to the Public Library on 5th Avenue. Clearly, I wasn't the first person to have had this idea. The microfilm was so badly warped that I needed a librarian's help affixing it to the spindle, and the scratches were so severe that I had to reverse the printer setting to white on black. Even then the text was barely decipherable. Three hours, $12 in dimes and a half-dozen paper jams later, my expedition was complete. I read 'Hapworth' slowly over the next few weeks, four or five pages at a time. This was partly due to the strain on my eyes of the blurry white-on-black text, but mainly because I suspected it would be the last thing I'd ever read by Salinger for the very first time.

The last paragraph is actually lifted wholesale from an article I read in 2005 in the *Brooklyn Rail*, which prompted me to make the same expedition. It was written to celebrate the release of *The Complete New Yorker*, an 8-DVD-ROM archive containing half a million pages from all 4,000-plus issues since 1925. I became intrigued by the various entwined values suddenly in flux: the 'auratic' value of the lost story, the romantic value of the pilgrimage to the library, and the monetary value of the original publication – all of which were significantly heightened by Salinger's seclusion. I was curious, too, to see how the release of the digitized archive would recalibrate this delicate economy, given that such as the Seymour issue mentioned at the start of this piece would suddenly be made available, cheap, convenient, pristine, and to some sensitive types, perhaps, a little mundane.

Of course, those eight DVDs were already almost obsolete. After only a couple of years they were supplanted by a portable hard disk, and now the whole archive is online and fully available to subscribers. As it turns out, the monetary value doesn't seem to have been affected (original copies of the 'Hapworth' issue remain at a steady $400), though I expect the numbers of romantics making the pilgrimage to the New York Public Library have fallen off a bit.

The NYPL's fiche reader can output directly to a laser printer, which is the source of the distressed fragments below. I want to point to three things in these scans. First, Salinger's opening line in 'Hapworth', which could double as an epigraph to the present essay: 'Some comment in advance, as plain and bare as I can make it.' Second, the small advert for a fragrance called 'Summer Camp' on sale at a store in Manhattan called Serendipity 3, which was purported by Salinger cultists to be a postmodern hoax in reference to Seymour's camp Hapworth. And third, how the scratches from the fiche's general wear and tear trace the story I just told, an unwitting graphic testament and example of what I've come to think of as form as a kind of deposit or side-effect – a form of evidence.



HAPWORTH 16, 1924

SOME comment in advance, in plain and bare as I can make it: My name, first, is Buddy Glass, and for a good many years of my life—very possibly, all forgetive—I have felt myself installed, elaborately wired, and, occasionally, plugged in, for the purpose of shedding some light on the short, reticulate life and times of my late, eldest brother, Seymour Glass, who died, committed suicide, opted to discontinue living, back in 1948, when he was thirty-one.

I intend, right now, probably on this same sheet of paper, to make a start at typing up an exact copy of a letter of Seymour's that, until four hours ago, I had never read before in my life. My No further comment, except to repeat that I mean to type up an exact copy of the letter, word for word, comma for comma. Beginning here.

May 28, 1965.

Camp Simon Hapworth
Hapworth Lake
Hapworth, Maine
Hapworth 16, 1924, or quite in the lap of the gods!

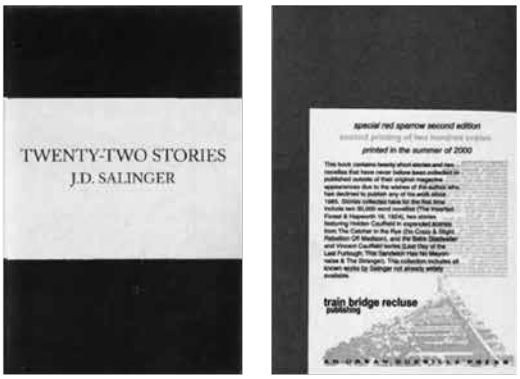
DEAR BESSIE, LES, BEATRICE, WALTER, AND WAKER:

I WILL write for us both, I believe, as Buddy is engaged elsewhere for




French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes something similar in a chapter on 'The Vestige of Art' in his book *The Muses*.[30] His 'vestige' approximates 'the trace of a cause' as opposed to an image of the cause itself, which isn't quite the same thing. The distinction is admittedly infra-thin, but thankfully he magnifies it with two simple examples: the smoke of a cigarette rather than the cigarette itself (or its ash), and the footprint of a shoe rather than the shoe (or body) of the person who made it. Both are clearly *traces of the causes of specific actions*. All of which is blatant enough when a machine inadvertently yet conspicuously creates this vestige to trace some 40 years of committed readers. However, as you might have guessed, I want to claim that there's an approach to designing, or form-giving, that precipitates a similar state — a sort of form-*taunting*.

Now, I said that there were two 'official' primary sources of 'Hapworth' in the archives, but there was a third, less official means, too: a notorious bootleg published in 1974. The same year, a newspaper report claimed that 'During the last two months, about 25,000 copies of these books, priced at $3 to $5 … have been peddled in person to bookstores at $1.50 each by men who always call themselves John Greenberg and say they come from Berkeley. Their descriptions have varied from city to city.'




Here's the cover of the original bootleg – at least, as far as it's possible to know these things second-hand – that now retails online for at least $1000. Copies were eventually seized by Salinger's lawyers and pulped. And next to it, a remake from 2000, which was similarly apprehended and the bootleggers penalized. Then sometime in 2007 I inadvertently came across a couple of password-protected PDFs of what I assume to be the second samizdat on an Eastern European website. Fortunately the password was attached, and I was able to make an edition from that PDF which I wrapped in a cover the same indigo as the original bootleg. Unsurprisingly, I soon came across another counterfeit edition evidently made from the same PDF, put out by a tiny hobbyist imprint that shall remain truly nameless – also with a blank cover.

It perhaps goes without saying by now that the form (or in this case, non-form) of this genealogy of covers is distinctly drawn from the specific circumstances of their production. It just about bears repeating one more time that, as such, they come across as inevitable and unequivocal.

[30] See §3.10.

It's hard to keep tabs on exactly which of the various 'underpublished' stories (as they're nicely known) these pirate editions contain, but hidden in the back of at least one of them are two pieces from 1970 ascribed to a certain 'Giles Weaver', who's rumoured to have been Salinger writing under a pseudonym. A fairly solid case for the claim was made in a short article by Mark Phillips from 1985. If it *is* Salinger, the ante of curiosity is upped by the fact that this remains his most recent output by a considerable margin of five years since 'Hapworth'. And for someone as revered and reclusive as this particular writer, this is obviously a Big Deal.

Giles Weaver's writing is an enigma in its own right. His entire body of work comprises two installations of what are titled 'Notes from the Underground' in the form of a 'log' (that anticipates all the characteristics of what we now know to be a blog) published in subsequent issues of *The Phoenix*, a self-proclaimed 'pacifist literary journal' founded in the 1930s. Terminated by the War, the journal rose again, phoenix-like, in 1970, and Weaver showed up in the first two numbers of this new series with a pair of markedly odd diatribes that often border on gibberish – but fascinatingly so. Other than the fact that they describe locations and daily affairs that seem fully consonant with Salinger's life in New Hampshire (not to mention a pronounced sense of resentment and an abiding interest in Eastern religion), what makes the case particularly convincing, it seems to me, is that the writing doesn't merely abide Salinger's previous style or interests, but rather anticipates what they might have plausibly become if carried on along a certain manic trajectory. That's to say, Weaver is either Salinger in disguise, or someone who could anticipate and write a plausible impersonation of how Salinger might have been writing five years on from 'Hapworth' – which, as an act of mimicry, would itself be an impressive literary feat. Here's a sample:

> Dear Phoenix, This here isn't meant to be a definitive analysis of our situation and if anyone pleases themselves to regard it as such or pleases themselves to publish it as such I will be pleased to render unto them a knuckle sandwich right in the kisser not via typewriter but with my fist, so to speak, so to speak due to the fact of the matter – that is to say, I find bloodshed a form of communication.[31]

Which, as Phillips notes, is a stylistic manoeuvre so wholly Salingerian that it's hard to conceive anyone else writing in quite the same manner.



Self-portrait by *Giles Weaver*

'Weaver' prefaces his log entries by listing the contents of an envelope supposedly sent to the editor of *The Phoenix* along with his manuscript, including this self-portrait – a Xerox of a paper collage that's duly printed, per his request, together with the piece. If this *is* Salinger writing, it's certainly an intriguing about-face: the publicity-despising writer who consistently refuses any and all *depictions* of his prose, and photographs of himself, here providing his own self-portrait to front what essentially amounts to an autobiographical diary.

[31] Giles Weaver, 'Notes from the Underground', *The Phoenix* (new series), no.'s 1 and 2, c. 1970–1.
See: http://www.dextersinister.org/MEDIA/PDF/GuileWeaver.pdf.

There's a ring of truth-being-stranger-than-fiction about the Weaver case, and here are two more pieces of prosecuting evidence. First, Salinger's character's names often tended towards thinly veiled double entendres, the most famous and obvious instance being 'See-more Glass' as alluding to the saintly visionary of a sensitive, fragile family. With this in mind, says Phillips, could 'Giles Weaver' not serve to similarly cloak a surreptitious weaver of guile? Second, a biographical note in *The Phoenix* describes the writer as 'the pseudonym for a writer living like a solitary bushman in America's Kalahari.' Hmn.

To wrap this up, in the late 1990s rumours started to circulate that a book edition of 'Hapworth' was finally due to be released by a tiny publishing house from Virginia called Orchises Press. Although a catalogue number appeared, further details were suspiciously scarce – a series of deferrals and little else. Eventually I stopped checking its progress, but a couple of months after Salinger died at the age of 91 in January 2010, *New York* magazine ran a short story by the founder of Orchises Press, Roger Lathbury, who had written to Salinger on a whim back in 1988 saying he was keen to properly publish what still remained the author's most recent and severely underpublished output. Lathbury was duly shocked, he recalled, to receive back a typed note, signed 'JDS', saying he'd consider it.

The publisher received a follow-up in the spring of 1996 – that's *eight years later* – from Salinger's agent to announce that a personal letter was on its way granting the request, along with a caveat of exacting standards. It seemed that Lathbury had somehow been positively vetted, presumably for not being pushy or otherwise representing the commercialism that Salinger resented. A breezy letter from Salinger followed, proposing lunch, followed by a phone call, and the two met the next week at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

Lathbury had hastily prepared a hardback dummy he hoped would satisfy Salinger's demands. For instance, he made sure to set the story with plenty of leading – the space between lines of type – to ensure that, quoting one of Salinger's letters, 'Seymour could breathe'. This, Lathbury realized, would also usefully serve to bulk up a novella that, although long for a magazine, was notably short for a book. And this, in turn, appeared to solve another problem: Salinger had stated that he strongly preferred type on a book's spine to read horizontally rather than vertically – that's to say, across the width of a spine rather than along its length. Obviously, the thinner the book was, the trickier this would be to achieve. Lathbury goes on:

> As I worked out the specifications, I tried deliberately not to make the book 'elegant.' He had been quick to object to my use of the word, which to him connoted narcissism and preciousness. The buckram he asked me to use is the functional, unpretty material that libraries use to rebind worn-out books. Hapworth, the book, was to start out this way: straightforward and pure.[32]

The two met to discuss further protestant requirements: no running heads, a plain blue fabric headband to match the plain binding, no dust jacket (of course), and on the buckram cover nothing except the title and Salinger's name – in that order. In the months that followed, a few more esoteric requirements were insisted upon, including the remarkable condition that distributors and stores would have to buy the book for the same price as the customers, meaning no wholesale and no mark-up. In other words, the sole profit that any bookstore wishing to stock it would be the privilege of being able to sell it!

Such estimable arrogance continued to drive Salinger's increasingly unhinged art direction: on second (or forty-second) thoughts, the title and name were to be omitted from the cover and left only on the spine. Then, when Lathbury regrettably informed Salinger that the spine was actually too small for the type to be stamped cleanly into the fabric, the author proposed that it should instead run downwards, strung out on a very slight diagonal as a minor concession to legibility. According to the by now

[32] Roger Lathbury, 'Betraying Salinger', *New York Magazine*, 4 April, 2010, http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/65210.

heroically long-suffering Lathbury, the dummy spine he had made according to this spec was 'awful: ugly, difficult to read, ostentatiously weird.'[33]

In my humble opinion, though, it's about as close to sublime as graphic design – if you can call it that – gets: a graphic equivalent of that little bit of perfect prose about bloodshed-as-communication. So few elements, such an outlandish result.

Gilles Deleuze once described the nature of true friendship as the ability to apprehend the particular nature of another's madness, the nuance of their peculiarity. If the appreciation of art (or literature, or graphic design) can be considered an equivalent type of 'friendship', one that involves an analogous kind of connection and empathy, then it follows that our appreciation of a certain work amounts to our recognizing its own intrinsic 'madness', its own idiosyncratic trace that guarantees it sprung from one mind, and one mind alone. This rings entirely true to me. It grasps the nature of what's particular about Salinger's writing and these book covers, both born of the same temperament. And so it seems fitting that Salinger's last work ends up bound in a cover analogous to the story's return to childhood – a kind of Zen form, if you like. (It's surely impossible to make a claim for 'Zen' in this context without sounding faintly ridiculous, though if I could make it sound grounded rather than flighty, this is still the word I'd want to use.) And so it came to pass that a few weeks before the book was finally due to come out – now almost a decade since Lathbury had first proposed it – Salinger pulled the plug on the entire project, on the grounds that Lathbury had registered the book with the Library of Congress, distributors had taken note, and advance copies were being touted on the internet. Unforgivable.

More recently, though, someone else (who had obviously read the *New York* magazine piece) made the edition that Orchises Press didn't – a couple of people, in fact, at the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht in 2010. They did a remarkably thorough job, and the result is as pure as surely even Salinger could hope for.

This returns me, finally, to that earlier point about insight. Learning how to regard, to really *see* this kind of work – products that emphatically capture the thought that accompanies making – fosters working in the same manner, with the same care, with the same attention to detail, and at the same patient rate. Such objects are inherently pedagogical: lessons can be learned, and those lessons put to further use.

I have no real sense of how clearly the two halves of this essay overlap – or need to, really. But at the risk of repeating myself one more time, the point of bringing them together here is that the similarly slow, stubborn attitudes of the collectively-minded *New Yorker* and the single-minded Salinger are similarly manifest in inevitable and unequivocal products. At once impervious to passing fashion and received wisdom, they are sibling instances of bracingly neurotic design.[34]

## 5.6: THINKING CONTINGENCY

'Contingent' variously means: 'dependent on something not yet certain' (tenuous, precarious); 'liable to happen or not' (uncertain, indefinite); and 'happening by chance or without known cause' (surprising, accidental). *New York to London and Back* was the title of a group exhibition organized

[33] See this chapter's frontispiece.

[34] Sometime between presenting the original talk and writing it up into the present section, I came across the following announcement: 'But starting on Monday, *New Yorker* fans are going to notice some small but subtle design changes (...) The magazine is updating its table of contents, contributors page, "Goings On About Town", Briefly Noted and Fiction sections. These changes include changing the number of columns, redrawing the Irvin typeface and introducing Neutraface as a secondary one. (…) Mr. Remnick said he expected to receive some complaints from readers next week.' (See: *The New York Times*, September 15, 2013). Then I came across another: 'Now, with the release of a new biography by David Shields and Shane Salerno (and the companion documentary), comes the claim that five new Salinger books will be published between 2015 and 2020 – including *The Family Glass*, an anthology of existing Glass stories as well as new material and a genealogy of the eccentric clan …'. (See: www.entertainment.time.com/2013/09/07/discovering-j-d-salingers-lost-stories).

by New York gallerist Miguel Abreu and installed at Thomas Dane Gallery in London, 2011.[35] It was also the premise for an evening of talks and discussion, later collected into a slim volume called *The Medium of Contingency*.[36]

'Thinking contingency': this phrase recurs throughout the book, and seems to allude to at least three things at once: (1) thinking about the *topic* of contingency, (2) thinking in a way that *accommodates* contingency, and most importantly (3) thinking *in a contingent manner*. Inasmuch as the sense of 'thinking contingency' is *in abeyance*, it models its meaning – hence the sense of contingency as a 'medium', as a means rather than an end.

Contingency is itself nothing new, as Robin Mackay acknowledges in his introduction:

> The formation of the solar system, the emergence of life on this planet, the determination of the structure of our unconscious through biological, hereditary and social evolution – itself now subject to the accelerated technological reformations of capital ... We are the product of contingent events, material, histories, webs and networks of anonymous forces.[37]

However, he continues, the necessity to 'think contingency' has latterly turned urgent. The pronounced interest in contingency in art and philosophy right now is inevitable, he says, in an age in which world events 'just *strike* (…) *befall* us, from outside any pre-registered set of possibilities', and with what seems like increasing frequency and impact. Devastating world events – global terrorism, civil revolution, financial collapse, ecological disaster – seem *radically* contingent, i.e. on an unprecedented scale. Hence thinking through how we might respond to this condition is a pressing concern with 'very real consequences' across the board.

As was laid out in chapter 1, in the early 1960s Umberto Eco promoted the idea that artworks are tools that allow us to perceive the world in a manner congruent with an era's most pressing, vanguard concerns. *The Medium of Contingency* duly comprises a few attempts to 'think contingency' through art and writing. Much of the thinking in the book extends from Quentin Meillassoux's recent metaphysical treatise *After Finitude* (2008), the central argument of which is that our prevalent ways of thinking are delusional and pernicious because founded on prediction and probability.[38] Instead, he attempts to think beyond such a stable, containable worldview: how to operate from within a situation rather than attempting – and inevitably failing – to harness it from outside? From Meillassoux's vantage, there *is* no outside – all is one 'great outdoors'.

Properly contingent thinking, he says, is 'in direct violation of all dogmatic systems of metaphysics, philosophies that bind in principle every event, past and future, within an account of *what must be*.' It implies the polar opposite – a fundamentally open-ended philosophy not bound by dogmas, laws or absolutes.

To restate this slightly: in attempting to think contingency 'on its own terms', any *predictive* philosophy short-circuits itself because based on some kind of *ground*; real contingency is 'that which thinking can only grasp *as event*', i.e. in situ and in action. From this perspective, the concept of a

[35] *New York to London and Back*, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, 18 January – 19 February, 2011.

[36] Robin Mackay, ed., *The Medium of Contingency* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2011), p. 4.

[37] Ibid., p. 3.

[38] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* [2006, French] (London: Continuum, 2008).

'contingency plan' is a contradiction in terms, because any attempt to tame contingency misses its mark by 'reabsorbing the contingent event into a new rational metaphysics'.[39]

What are the implications of these ontological concerns for art?

Duchamp's readymades introduced the idea that merely naming something as art qualified it as such, hence the very paradigm of modern art was inaugurated by the realization of its own contingency, says Mackay. However, in the wake of this expansive introduction, *The Medium of Contingency*'s other contributors focus on a far narrower category of work concerned with the contingency of specific materials. What they mean exactly is hard to say, as they don't refer to any specific artists, works, schools or movements, but I assume they mean such as Abstract Expressionism, Process Art, and that which involves chance procedures or instructions loose enough to yield indeterminate results.

In any case, in line with their blanket dismissal of any 'rational' or 'grounded' philosophy's ability to address contingency, *The Medium*'s speakers basically reject this sort of work (that explores the contingency of materials) as insufficiently extreme: feeble 'neo-romantic' *gestures in the direction of* contingency. Such *nominally* open work doesn't adequately inhabit or *do* contingency, they say; at best it weakly represents or celebrates it.

How might we think contingency via art and writing *appropriately*, then? Another contributor, critic and philosopher Reza Negarestani, reasons that any claim to openness is always limited because the artist admits only as much openness into the working procedure as he or she can 'afford'. Real contingency has no such convenient threshold. 'We cannot simply be *open* to contingency,' he says, 'because our openness and consequently our modes of interaction are determined by our capacities.' So again: how to productively insinuate ourselves into situations *beyond* our capacities and expectations, to overreach ourselves?

Negarestani argues for what he describes as a decisively 'twisted' interaction with form, counter-intuitively insisting that this must be based not on openness but *closure*. If 'romantic' open works merely *domesticate* contingency, a sufficiently 'closed' equivalent within strict bounds (a goal and a deadline, a context and an audience) might be organized in such a way as to offer itself up as what he calls 'a good meal' or 'genuine prey' for its proper expression. In this scenario, circumstances are let loose on the as-yet-unrealized work that registers them as a kind of recording device, like a seismograph.[40]

What he's getting at is that it's less useful to instigate a piece of work with no ostensible goal beyond the superficial 'playing out' of its materials (e.g. paint running 'autonomously' down a canvas, or a sculpture deliberately set up to decay) than to embark on a project that, while undertaken in view of a definite goal, is susceptible and supple enough to register events along the way. This implies a sense of the *plot thickening* – an artistic sixth sense that confirms things are going awry and so headed in the right wrong direction.

Each of the *The Medium of Contingency*'s contributors run with Negarestani's notion of twisting time as a means of cultivating or 'flirting with' the illogical and unpredictable. Former stockbroker Elie Ayache approaches the subject from the ostensibly remote point of view of financial forecasting, yet his thoughts align entirely with both Mackay's general philosophical remarks, and Negarestani's application of the same in view of making art.

[39] There are significant echoes here of Set Theory and Incompleteness, i.e. the impossibility of transcending a 'subjective' situation in order to get an 'objective' handle on it, as discussed in §3.11.

[40] This is somewhat analogous to design maxims like 'drawing form from content' and 'letting the material speak'. To let an object 'design itself' implies disregarding preconceptions and personal preferences. Negarestini's artistic closure can thus be thought equivalent to a design task with an upfront brief and an end product in view, and 'thinking contingency' as commensurate with the way the peculiarities of given material influence formal decisions along the way; a designer in this sense facilitates rather than directs.

Ayache states that while market speculation is typically based on probabilistic models, which on first glance seems reasonable enough, financial markets are in fact radically *un*predictable. On reflection, this is obvious enough, because *any* degree of predictability would automatically undermine the point of 'speculating futures' in the first place. Drawing on his first-hand experience, Ayache insists that the predictive models typically employed are, without exception, completely useless (because a model that predicts, say, the 'volatility' of a derivative value would properly require a second-level measure of volatility itself – the volatility of volatility – and so on unto infinity). Simply put, the ground our habitually deterministic way of thinking assumes must be in place simply isn't there; what we take to be a system is in fact completely arbitrary; market traders literally don't know what they're doing. The situation therefore *epitomizes* contingency, and the 2008 global financial collapse is but one brutally clear and recent consequence of the flawed philosophy that continues to underpin the industry even in its ostensible recovery. Precisely: the inability to think contingency.

It goes without saying that the mechanisms of global finance are a defining aspect of the present condition; and if the tools for thinking around and about those mechanisms – the philosophical tools – are flawed and inadequate, there's no chance of using them constructively to better ends.

Again, this echoes the anti-foundational foundation of Meillassoux's metaphysics. In *After Finitude* Meillassoux insists that contingency is *a priori*, that it *presupposes being*. His mentor Alain Badiou laid the ground for this thinking in *Being and Event* (1988), in which an event is defined as something beyond anticipation or prediction.[41] The market according to Ayache is thus a *perpetual event* – permanently in a state of surprise or novelty. Inasmuch as it can't be anticipated or predicted, Badiou's sense of event inverts the regular 'law' of cause and effect. Like a police procedural, it's an effect that retroactively makes apparent a line of causality, a 'backwards narrative'. This chimes, too, with Ayache's ultimate example of thinking contingency: writing.

> Writing ... is something that is beyond probability and 'states of the world'. It's something where the writer can really throw himself into a process of writing, blindly, so to speak – and one of my favourite expressions is that he is then *traversed by contingency*, so he almost surprises himself with what he is writing. To me, that's writing. Even though you may have thought about it, and you had planned it ... there are thoughts that you can only have through the material process of writing.[42]

The phenomenon of realizing what you think *through* writing (as opposed to first realizing what you think, then writing it down – which is also to say *writing as a way of thinking*) is familiar enough to anyone who essays on a regular basis. Ayache pinpoints the essence of this process by suggesting that such 'real' writing involves (here's that word again) twisting our usual habitual ideas of chronology and teleology; in other words, by teasing or tricking or distorting or destabilizing our regular, unidirectional sense of time and purpose to the extent that written 'effects' amount to literary 'events', reverse-engineering unanticipated lines of pending reason.[43] Italo Calvino wrote something similar about this catalytic capacity of writing in more technical terms:

> Did we say that literature (...) is merely the permutation of a restricted number of elements and functions? But is the tension in literature not continually striving to escape from this finite number? Does it not continually attempt to say something it cannot say, something it does not know, and that no one could ever know?

[41] Badiou also provocatively violates the foundational axiom of Set Theory by claiming that an event is *a set that contains itself*. Inasmuch as this notion asserts its own sovereign logic beyond the established laws of metaphysics, it recursively qualifies as an event itself, thereby neatly (and smugly) proving its own point. See also chapter 1, fn. 35.

[42] Ibid., p. 24.

[43] This is an idea native to gestalt psychology: wholes are not conceived as simply a sum of pre-existing parts; rather, a whole *generates* its parts. Otherwise put, the parts didn't exist as such prior to the perception of the whole.

> A thing cannot be known when the words and concepts used to say it have not been used in that position, not yet arranged in that order, with that meaning.[44]

In sum, we can say that artists who coax contingency to traverse their work via a necessarily twisted writing are akin to those speculators who successfully play the market. Traders in financial futures literally *write* the market in real-time, reflexively generating the conditions for their own work in a way no analytic model can account for. 'It has nothing to do with knowledge', insists Ayache; 'To be a trader, you have to be a performer, like on a stage.'

As an entrepreneur of financial modelling well aware that predicting futures is a contradiction in terms, Ayache's aptly twisted conclusion is that it remains necessary to produce the old useless probability models – not in order to apply them, but *to go beyond them.* A probability model that models *what not to do*: a second-level purpose, a meta-model, perhaps, but a model nonetheless.

## 5.7: THE MAFIA GAME: A 'MATTER OF CONCERN'

This section is adapted from a preface and an afterword to 'The Original Mafia Rules' – an article that relates the mechanics of a game initially developed as a psychological experiment. The game's rules, which are summarized below and widely available online, were published verbatim in *Bulletins of The Serving Library* largely to provide an excuse for this brief essay, which diverts the original point of the game to other ends.[45]

The Mafia Game is a rudimentary role-play game. Conceived as an academic experiment by Russian psychologist Dimma Davidoff in the late 1980s, it was designed to show how the economy of knowledge plays out in an enclosed community. In the bastardized, popularized version that has circulated as a party game since, this 'knowledge' amounts to who's Mafia and who's not.

Here's a quick account of how it works. First, everyone in the group receives a secret note that assigns them the role of either Mafioso (= corrupt) or Citizen (= honest). Then the game cycles through proxy days and nights. At night everyone shuts their eyes, then, at the word of a communally-appointed God who oversees the proceedings, Mafia awake (open their eyes) while Citizens remain asleep, and silently choose together (by eye contact and frantic pointing) one Citizen to knock off. They sleep again, all players awake, and God announces the brutal death, which leads into much speculation and accusation regarding the possible perpetrator. There's a round of voting to decide on a prime suspect Mafioso assassin (which involves a lot of double- and triple-bluffing by the actual Mafia). Finally a verdict is reached and the accused lynched, even if innocent. Then the whole thing starts over: another night, another killing, more speculation, accusation, voting and lynching.

The aim of the game, depending on your proxy allegiance, is for all Mafia to eliminate all citizens without being identified and killed off themselves; or conversely, for the citizens to successfully identify all Mafia and hang the lot. *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik describes the game as demonstrating 'the many and pressing kinds of double-bind logic that fill a social group if its members suspect there are enemies within it'. He continues:

> The ostensible pleasure of the game lies in testing your own skills as a dissembler and as a spotter of dissemblers – in lying and spotting liars. Both eager cooperation and absolute paranoia are essential to the strategic game. Yet the really fascinating thing about Mafia is seeing how much pure irrationality lingers in its play, how little real deduction and how much sheer panic govern its conduct. The game

[44] Calvino, 'Cybernetics and Ghosts', op. cit., p. 18.

[45] See: Dimma Davidoff, 'The Original Mafia Rules', *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #2, 2011.

> quickly breaks down, as social groups will, into small circles of belief, which become lynch mobs of distrust on the next turn.[46]

Over the past decade or so, Bruno Latour has propagated a distinction between 'matters of fact' and 'matters of concern'.[47] Fundamentally, he's out to demolish the bedrock faith in scientifically proven 'facts' constituent of Modern-era, Enlightenment-based thinking. Because scientific assertions are based on experiments performed in a vacuum (both literally and metaphorically), he argues that while useful for debunking all manner of long-held myths, their 'truth' is ultimately a distortion of reality, too. In other words, facts are fundamentally flawed precisely because they are conceived in detached and autonomous circumstances, and so remain a pernicious means of perceiving – and dealing with – the world at large.

Latour calls instead for the facility to grasp not isolated objects but the profoundly open and unpredictable relations among interconnected *things*, meaning the constantly shifting scenographies of interests, accidents, contradictions, conspiracies, changes in fortune, allegiance, currency, weather, and so on. And while, amid the ever-increasing prevalence and visibility of networks, we are surely becoming better at apprehending these relations – and their knock-on effects – and the effects of those effects – he maintains that our ways of looking are still way too grounded in the old mode. In a talk titled 'A Cautious Prometheus' (2008), he notes how the fallacy of facts is reflected in the old models of modelling, from architectural renderings and mechanical blueprints to scale models and prototypes, from perspective drawing and projective geometry to Computer-Aided Design and Google Maps.[48] In their various distillations, flattenings and abstractions, he says, all bear a marked lack of resemblance to the phenomena they purport to represent; ultimately, their simulations or 'gatherings' are less utopian than simply *atopic*. Hence his persistent call for new ways of *drawing things together* – making things public not from a resolutely objective, external point of view, but from within and while going with the flow.

Offered here as a thought experiment, then, the mundane Mafia Game is a simple, precarious and not altogether serious means to set up a different kind of vantage – of what openness and contingency look like from the inside. Contrary to the usual omniscience of the bird's- or God's-eye view common to the modelling techniques listed above, when called upon to play either Honest or Mafioso, one's perspective of the whole encounter is always from within, as an invested *player*. Indeed, as a proxy participant of what's gaining ground as Object-Oriented Philosophy, Latour often speaks of ostensibly inert phenomena in terms of fully-loaded 'betting' and 'gambling' 'agents' and 'actants'. It's not surprising, then, that easy-assembly role-play seems an appropriate format to witness how a given situation's 'object' plays out – or perhaps orients itself.

Crucially, the game's short-lived alliances, enmities, suspicions, accusations, and protests assemble and collapse not only within a single round or single game, but with exponential complexity from one game to the next, and from one day or week to the next. When a recurring group of players become acquainted with both each other and the game, and as burgeoning real-world relationships overflow into the fictional scenography, negotiations become perceptibly contaminated and, naturally enough, entropic. As the game's founder Dimma Davidoff proclaims: 'The third game is great.' Beyond that, who knows?

Davidoff further asserts the enigmatic and wholly Latourian injunction that 'Players are free to introduce new procedures during the game, but no one has to follow them unless s/he finds their usage at that moment reasonable.' Such chronic, baffling contingency sounds a lot like that recounted by Latour in his summation of 'The Year in Climate Controversy' for *Artforum* in December 2010. He writes:

[46] Adam Gopnik, *Through the Children's Gate* [2006] (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 245.

[47] See §1.8.

[48] Bruno Latour, 'A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)', lecture at the conference *Networks of Design*, Falmouth, UK, 3 September, 2008, http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/112-DESIGN-CORNWALL.pdf.

> of course, there is no single institution able to cover, oversee, dominate, manage, handle, or simply trace an issue of such shape and scope. Even a summit of all the nations of the earth, preceded by the most strident media campaigns, could not digest an issue so intractable and so enmeshed in contradictory interests as this one ... myriad changes at all levels of existence, from cars to clothes, from architecture to industry, from agriculture to sewage. How could we imagine a global agreement amid so many entangled interests?[49]

With this in mind, potential players are pointed in the direction of Wikipedia's *Mafia (party game)* page to witness the extent of supplementary roles that have been added to the game's countless commercial and hobbyist adaptations over the past couple of decades. Examples include the Teenage Werewolf who must say the word 'werewolf' at least once each round, the Dentist who may select any other player at night and remove all of their teeth to prevent them speaking during the following day, and the Village Idiot whose only objective is to convince the rest of the town to kill him.

Davidoff dismisses such additions as superfluous, merely distracting from the game's basic coefficient: 'The only knowledge in the game is Mafia connections, everything else is artificial.' And yet Latour would surely counter that an altogether artificial game is entirely appropriate these days; in fact, implies a whole other scenario in which the redesign of the game – and the ability to observe the consequences of that redesign as and when they happen – and to respond to those consequences in situ – becomes the game itself: The New Mafia Rules.

During the week beginning 18 July, 2011, for instance, a group of us introduced our own new character, a 'Rupert Murdoch' who, in addition to his/her initial designation as Honest or Mafioso, is also privvy to the nightly carnage. First thing next morning, Murdoch is required to deliver the news to the whole community, the veracity of which depends entirely on his/her daily discretion and/or whim. Ultimately and uniquely, Murdoch's aim is neither to eliminate nor safeguard the rest of the players, only to perpetuate the game – and his or her presence in it – for as long as is practicably possible.

## 5.8: VOCAL REGISTERS: THREE FILMS

*The Medium of Contingency* articulates in depth what that phrase 'work in movement' insinuates: total immersion in a working process in view of manifesting precarious, uncertain and surprising events. Moreover, as the book's various thinkers seriously attempt to articulate the *point* of working this way, it ends up markedly more generous and engaging than the actual artworks in the exhibition that spawned their discourse in the first place. By all accounts, these works appear to have leaned heavily on the conference, book, and other gallery paraphernalia during the run of the show, while barely communicating much of anything at all *in and of themselves*.

This gap in communication is clear from a discussion following the talks also included in the book. Someone in the audience asks what a particular piece of sculpture by Alison Knowles – an unremarkable piece of worn-down driftwood – is 'doing' in the show exactly, i.e. in what way it connects with the ideas put forward by the speakers. Curator Miguel Abreu responds by accounting for something like contingency in Knowles's working process (she scavenges objects and lives with them for a time; their form gets refined and accumulates meaning), while Robin Mackay concurs that such objects serve as 'points of reference' for the general ideas under consideration, hooks on which to hang thoughts. But both only serve to confirm that the work relies on the crutch of attendant speaking and writing – which is only to say, it's as dumb and in need of assistance as most contemporary art these days.[50]

[49] Bruno Latour, 'The Year in Climate Controversy', *Artforum*, December 2010.

[50] To be clear: I have no problem with the idea that the conference and book perform this 'explanatory' work *per se*, i.e. that they are constituent parts of a greater whole, only that the formats are unevenly weighted. In the usual scheme of things, individual

By dumb I mean to imply ‘silent’, ‘inscrutable’, ‘recondite’, ‘obscure’ and so on – and to push for the opposite. I’m vouching for a kind of work that, while, sharing *The Medium of Contingency*’s ambition to produce work that ‘overreaches itself’ in order to be usefully ‘traversed by contingency’, is equally as concerned to communicate this premise and its outcome as clearly as possible without immediate recourse to what artist Joseph Grigley calls ‘exhibition prosthetics’. In other words, I’m after a kind of work that effectively ‘captions itself’ to the extent that any necessary elucidation is no longer discrete but constituent.[51]

Given this predilection for clarity, in the case of most of the artworks recounted in this thesis, the raw material set up to be worked over by circumstance is usually primarily *verbal* (i.e. rather than graphic) language. To recall Negarestani’s metaphors, the artists responsible provide *a good meal for contingency*: the work lays bare language in order that it gets appropriately *twisted* during the working process, and registers aspects of the contemporary condition (e.g. social mores, nascent technologies). And this is especially potent when trying to deal as clearly as possible with some timely subject that is by no means clear-cut. Displacement is a common theme here – between humans and machines, between past and present, between remembering and forgetting, and other such polarities that get refracted in equally displaced forms of language.

Here are three recent video works that seem to me to ‘think contingency’ in a far more spirited and self-evident way than the comparatively inert work that that made up the *From New York to London and Back* exhibition:



French artist Aurélien Froment’s short film *The Fourdrinier Machine Interlude* comprises a single slow tracking shot across a working replica of one of the world’s earliest papermaking machines, as raw pulp is being transformed into ready product. Patented by Henry Fourdrinier in 1800, this was the first machine to fully mechanize a process that had been done by hand since as early as 8BC. The film records a 1960s model on display in a museum in the vicinity of Basel, Switzerland, where this particular iteration of the paper-making process was originally invented. The camera matches the languid pace of the machine as the incipient product is carried through an extremely elegant assembly of rollers and gears.

‘Interlude’ has a double meaning here – a literal one in the sense that the seven-and-a-half minute film was originally produced to be inserted between other films during the 2010 Basel Art Fair, and an allusive one in the sense that the film temporarily isolates the machine in order to consider its cultural backstory and effects. There are a few versions of the same film. In the one I saw, the image is accompanied by the voice of what sounds like a high-school-age girl with a soft Irish accent.[52] She recounts a brief history of paper-making generally and the introduction of Fourdrinier’s machine

artworks and gallery exhibitions are clearly presented as primary, and talks, books, etc., as supplements or afterthoughts. The reasons for maintaining this hierarchy in a market-driven mileu are obvious enough, but it’s worth noting that a crop of fairly recent independent institutions seem to share a common interest in levelling or even inverting the usual structure. In these cases, what are usually considered as surround or support – architecture, events, publishing, talks – are no longer subservient but at least as substantial as artworks or exhibitions. See for instance: castillo/corrales in Paris; Kunstverein in Amsterdam; Support Structure in Birmingham; Yale Union in Portland, Oregon; Kadist Art Foundation in Paris and San Francisco; and Reena Spaulings, The Artists Institute, Triple Canopy, Primary Information, and Cabinet in New York.

[51] See chapter 7.

[52] Multiple versions of the film have been made with different people reading approximately the same script, including a French version read by a young boy, and an Italian one read by the Italian translator. These changes clearly and deliberately affect the film’s broader allusions.

specifically, along with a few offshoot anecdotes concerning such as the machine's influence on labour organization, the division of the working day into three eight-hour periods (labour, recreation, sleep), and the rapid abundance of diverse types of paper (for writing, blotting, typing, tracing, filtering, making cigarettes, and so on). The commentary highlights the discrepancy between what such a machine meant when first invented, and what it came to mean in light of the social and economic forces it significantly affected – including its current status as a museum piece.

But just as prominent is the gap between the sort of professional voiceover we'd normally expect to accompany such footage, and the girl's amateur attempt. It takes a few beats longer to register that the girl is actually reading at the threshold of her comprehension. She has a hard time articulating longer words, technical terms and foreign names, for instance, as well as some of the trickier bits of grammar and intonation. She also speeds up and slows down, trying to race to the end as soon as possible but continually tripped up by the text. And so it dawns that the reader is *in the process of becoming literate* herself, made possible in no small measure by the product she's describing – not to mention the endless inertia of the fact that the paper made on such machines was used to produce widely disseminated books that help make better versions of all those products, etc. etc. This inadvertent literacy-in-action is insinuated in more subtle ways, too. She doesn't seem particularly mindful, for instance, of how her mumbled, rushed reading will come across to an audience, yet the film has the odd effect of projecting a time when she'll be more lucid, having likely absorbed such skills – along with other aspects of social conformity.

*The Fourdrinier Machine Interlude*'s conspicuously involuted narrative, *verité* recording, and other such self-reflexive traits are by no means gratuitous. Rather, they reinforce aspects of the subject. We can clearly hear the sound of the (paper) script being turned and creased in the girl's hands, for instance, and such moments seem incidental rather than contrived – accidents and allusions happily absorbed into the final outcome. This seems true of the film's closing moments, too, when the camera suddenly breaks from its regular tracking shot as if momentarily distracted, then comes to rest on a bare patch of wall as the young narrator simultaneously trails off into the museum's natural surroundings:

> `... located in a former paper mill in the area of St Albantal. On one side, it extends off the Birs River, which rises at the foot of the Pierre-Pertuis pass in the Swiss Jura Mountains. On the other side, just below the mill, it re-joins the Rhine, and reaches the sea further to the North.`

Remembering that this picturesque region is also where the film was first projected, in that installment at least the 'interlude' has come full-circle – further duplicating the self-sustaining inertia of the breathtaking drive of literacy itself.



Irish artist Gerard Byrne has based a number of pieces of work on '1984 and Beyond', the title of a roundtable discussion between a group of leading science fiction writers that was published in two consecutive issues of *Playboy* in 1963. Luminaries such as Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury and Rod Serling share realworld predictions on diverse topics including space exploration, new technologies, sexual attitudes, drugs, the Cold War, and the daily life of millennial man. *Playboy*'s questions aim two decades ahead in homage to George Orwell's 1949 novel *1984*, though the writers' responses are considerably more optimistic – or naive – than Orwell's bleak prognosis. Algis Budrys, for instance, confidently predicts that 'our children will doubtless be able to buy a ticket to the Moon on a civilian ship, and it's quite likely the process will be as simple as buying an airline seat today. The per-mile cost will likely be a fraction of present airline fares'. Meanwhile, Frederik Pohl asserts that 'if in 1984

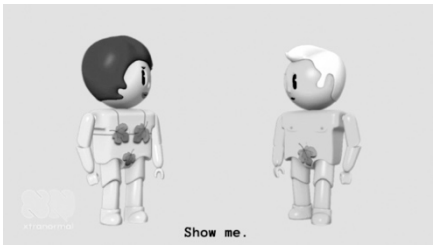
you feel depressed it will be because you want to feel depressed; if you don't, you'll need only open your medicine cabinet to feel just about any way you want, including erotic to the nth power.'

The most substantial piece Byrne has made using '1984 and Beyond' as source material is an eponymous 40-minute video. It was shot at two locations in The Netherlands that approximate in (late modernist) architecture what the writers were after in their prospective fiction: inside the vast, high-ceilinged lobbies of the 1971 Provinciehuis in Den Bosch; and outside the 1964 sculpture pavilion at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, amid looming Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore sculptures that seem at once archaic and futuristic. In Byrne's adaptation, the writers hang out in congenial conversation drawn from the *Playboy* article, loitering in groups of twos and threes as if talking shop on a weekend retreat.

What started out as an extended conversation, transcribed then presumably edited, rearranged and refined for publication in print in a hugely popular magazine with a relatively short life expectancy, is now reconsidered, recompressed and rearranged for other channels 40 years on. Byrne started by staging a public reading of the *Playboy* piece, in which the actors developed their characters for the pending film. Then a condensed shooting script was assembled from the live event, its various sequences shot on location, and the footage finally assembled into a film to be screened in sundry art venues. Byrne highlights the discrepancies between these various shifts, so the film becomes as much about the process and politics of editing and re-enactment as its nominal subject, the future.

Like Froment's *Fourdrinier*, the thematic dislocations in *1984 and Beyond* – slippages across time (1949, 1963, 1984, 2004) and between media (literature, architecture, film, art) – are cannily refracted in the film's form. Where the *Playboy* article simply projects ahead a couple of decades, a contemporary viewer of Byrne's restaging is naturally well aware of watching from the actual beyond that the writers are imagining with such misplaced conviction. Just as jarring is the film's cartoonish aspect – all chunky cardigans, polo necks, pipes and heavy spectacles, compounded by the distancing effect of heavily-accented Dutch actors reciting English words originally spoken by mostly American writers. In all these ways, the film acts out the project's skewed genealogies.

It adds up to something like *a parody of the suspension of disbelief*, which, in turn, seems to mirror the sci-fi writers' wayward imaginings. Even allowing for the benefit of hindsight, it's hard to believe they really believe what they claim to believe in 1964. Likewise, the contemporary viewer of Byrne's restaging can't ignore the fact that the set, the actors, and the acting are all a bit *much*. And so Byrne's transforms the original roundtable into a markedly arch piece of work, reflecting the writers' fantastical imaginings in the fantasy of its own *mise en scène*, as duplicitous as the genre under consideration: 'science' in its ostensible claim to forensic re-enactment; 'fiction' in the way it flaunts its artificiality. Once again, this curious marriage of form and content seems to have happened less by design, more as the welcome result of a loose, searching process.




Frances Stark's *My Best Thing* is a feature-length digital cartoon first made for the 2011 Venice Biennial, a self-proclaimed 'real life novel' made using a rudimentary CGI software called Xtranormal that generates 3D-effect avatars akin to plastic Playmobil men and women. The fragmentary story unfolds over ten-and-a-half brief episodes via a series of exchanges between Stark's protagonist double and two (purportedly) Italian men she meets online at a live video sex/chat site. These comic alter-egos interact against a lurid green cyber-backdrop, nominal cipher of a neutral 'possibility space' outside quotidian coordinates that, as Mark Godfrey has noted, serves to emphasize the characters' melancholy

'lost-ness'.[53] Private parts obscured by absurdly chaste fig leaves or underpants, the pre-and post-'coital' banter between the Adams and Eve is variously flirtatious, intimate, distracted, hysterical and profane, and the outcome unusually compulsive. This is partly because of its alarmingly candid dialogue, but also due to the dissonance between the work's emphatically childish graphics and emphatically adult subject matter.

Equally as magnetic is the way the film perpetually sidetracks from the relatively instant gratification of casual virtual sex into slower-burn philosophical concerns. These mostly mine the discomfiting contradictions inherent in a contemporary art career. In one sequence, for instance, the limits of Stark's critical agency and audience are offset against one of her virtual partners' brutally practical participation in Italian street riots then underway. Later, the characters contemplate why so many of the philosophically inclined writers they admire end up as suicides.

In oblique homage to Federico Fellini's 1963 movie *8½*, Stark's equally im-proper 'novel' cycles through fascination, obsession, frustration, and ultimately disillusion with virtual sexual relations. Initially pursued as relief from intellectual reflection and so time away from work, Stark's recreational sex is inadvertently processed into work regardless. Vicarious life is transformed into a reflective story rife with equivalences and paradoxes that are simultaneously exhilarating and sad: first, sexual promiscuity is mirrored in the work's manifestly Open Source production; second, just as the chat site is a very public portal to a very intimate exchange, the artwork is a very public exhibition of a very personal experience; third, old-school copyright is flouted by excerpting from Fellini's classic in direct contrast with free-floating music videos and riot footage rechannelled from YouTube.

In this way, the cultural issues thrown up by the nascent technology of the sex site and its attendant links are less explicated than *registered*: the hegemony of English as lingua franca of global capitalism, the ambiguous boundaries of domestic and social spheres; the push and pull of desire and responsibility; the changing shape of sexual mores; the limits of connectivity, self-exploitation, artificial enhancement, diminishing attention, and so on.

*My Best Thing* sticks a further flag in the zeitgeist by assimilating the distracted and distracting speed and compression of contemporary writing – all the acronyms, abbreviations, condensations, coinings and misspellings familiar from emailing, type-chatting and texting, further compounded by the Italian avatars' bad grammar via online translations. The ubiquitous LOL meme is as proliferate and telling as the rest of the queasily current cultural subject matter flaunted here. Familiar inanity lightens this distinctly heavy artwork, but the deeper you get into *My Best Thing*, the more sinister those incessant LOLs become. John Kelsey recently described the meme as marking a double loss of language and of laughter that, disembodied and abbreviated, 'seems to reveal both the ecstasy and anxiety of our nonstop displacement within social media'.[54] By force of repetition, LOL's compressed convenience reveals the absence of actual laughter it supposedly signals – 'ever more applicable in direct correlation to the degree that we overkill and wear it out'.[55] It's not a laughing matter.

Stark has often quoted the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz's frustration that an audience never perceives more than a few 'accursed parts' in lieu of the glorious whole of the artwork that the artist alone has in mind. But she seems to have wrested a solution with *My Best Thing* by meeting the anxious, overcrowded, distracted conditions of the Venice Biennial head-on. It was produced as a cycle of A.D.D.-friendly parts, each trailing a bite-size summary as one minor cliffhanger after another coaxes the viewer to stay the distance, and the piece's considerable power lies in this rapid stop-start pace. It's an expert editing job that captures the coefficient of addiction and boredom characteristic of vanguard communication technologies, hyper-designed to nurture the state of being forever on the

[53] Mark Godfrey, 'Twenty-First century Art' in Jennifer Papararo and Kitty Scott, eds., *Frances Stark: My Best Thing* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2012).

[54] John Kelsey, 'Next-Level Spleen', *Artforum*, September 2012.

[55] Ibid.

verge of turning away, switching off, but never quite mustering the willpower to do so. And so in spite of itself, *My Best Thing* ends up an ominously hypnotic and highly dubious fix of art.

## 5.9: 'URBANE IMAGE', UR-EXAMPLE

In his 1980 book *Collected Words*,[56] Richard Hamilton recalls how in the early 1960s, in the wake of having painted what were later recognized as some of the founding works of Pop Art like *Hommage a Chrysler Corp* (1957) and *$he* (1958–61), he was invited to contribute to the second issue of ICA's short-lived *Living Arts* magazine. He staged an elaborate tableau conceived as a self-portrait to form a wraparound cover: an aerial photo of what would become a stereotypical Pop assemblage comprising what appears to be the top of a rocket ship, an open-topped Ford Thunderbrid, an American football player, a half-undressed model, a well-stocked refrigerator, a Dualit toaster, and other conspicuously modern appliances on a vivid pink ground.

The same issue also included Hamilton's short text, 'Urbane Image'. This was only the second piece he had published; the first was on Duchamp. In the preamble to *Collected Words* he writes that he 'persevered' with writing because 'the things I wished to express were not likely to be said by anyone else':

> I felt it necessary to justify what I was doing, or at least describe how certain things had come about, even though I was very conscious that written explanations of paintings by the painter must reveal a doubt in his ability to make himself understood by the graphic means: I said to myself often enough, if the paintings don't make sense in themselves, words won't help them.
>
> Perhaps it was impatience, or maybe a distrust in other people's capacity, or willingness, to read the personal symbols that an artist has necessarily to create. It could have been an over-eager wish to be understood by others when I barely understood what I was trying to do myself, and writing things out certainly made things clearer for me. Even so, it is unlikely that I would have made the effort had it not been for requests.[57]

Hamilton was therefore partly writing to bridge some gap in communication he thought the graphic work was incapable of achieving alone, and also in order to *realize* in concrete terms what he was up to on a more intuitive and ineffable level. It took an outside request (an invitation, a commission) to force the issue – to channel his work through a text-based medium that, compared to the relatively hermetic context of a one-off gallery show, would be widely multiplied and disseminated. In terms of reach, the stakes were considerably raised.

'Urbane Image' comprises 12 super-compressed paragraphs of heady, clipped, conspicuously American jargon. It begins:

> Chrysler Vice-President Virgil Exner models the plump detailing of the sleek 'flight sweep' – lining the crustacean recesses of Plymouth's headlamp hood with mirror-like chrome and giving it the dark brilliance that even *Life* and *Look* can't press onto the pages of their multimillion editions.[58]

[56] Richard Hamilton, 'Urbane Image' [1963], *Collected Words* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), p. 7.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., p. 49.

The piece then continues to inventorize – big business, automobiles, advertising, movies, domestic appliances – as if rapidly clicking through a carousel of slides:

> She's built (37, 22, 36), sociable (show a record player and a couple of highballs), intelligent (use a record sleeve with Zen in the title), available through the Bell system (Princess handset)[59]

And it ends, inevitably enough for 1963, in outer space, with a final word in homage to the final word of Joyce's *Ulysses*, 'yes':

> As the lens zooms slowly out they recede, minute against the immense void of Space. He murmurs 'Are you ready?' Shafts of golden light radiate from them as we await the immaculately dubbed response: 'Affirmative.'[60]

Particularly notable is the extent to which the text assimilates its subject matter's idiosyncratic language. Its terminology, semantics and syntax are all streamlined and immaculate, each line a full meal compressed into a single pill: 'Howard Hughes/Hawks found their answer at the drawing board'; 'The loaded, tight shapes that feed Exner and Earl are brought full CirclOform by the ad-man'; 'Passing UNO, NYC, NY, USA (point a)'; 'Aluminium is this century's colour'. The phrasing is elated, infectious; clearly it was a joy to write.

But the piece is actually a triptych. Trailing the main body, a glossary details the array of timely cultural and technical references (Jane Russell, Jello, Varaflame, Depth of field) – a list so extensive that it ends up twice as long as the body text being annotated. Then comes a corollary *graphic* glossary, a set of images (Michelangelo's God, a Bug-Eyed Monster, a *Playboy* Playmate) that crop up elsewhere in Hamilton's past, present and future work. The whole ensemble is one big repository of ideas, a kind of multi-dimensional manifesto without the format's usual self-righteousness.

'Urbane Image' is thus a prescient and remarkably accomplished instance of the sort of intrinsic self-captioning I'm arguing for here – to such a degree that it virtually caricatures the idea. Moreover, the piece dissolves art, writing and graphic design into a single compound that defies easy categorization. Disseminated via a magazine, it precludes the distracting value mechanisms of the gallery world. And most instructively of all, Hamilton recounts that 'interest in my work was established among a small group of London cognoscente solely by this publication and it produced an invitation to exhibit that had been refused me for eight years.'[61] As such, 'Urbane Image' not only captions itself; it equally serves to retroactively annotate Hamilton's earlier work – and by extension that which came later. This happenstance attempt to explain the relatively ambiguous, coded forms of his graphic work in the relatively definite, unequivocal terms of written language was a useful point of entry – a primer and a guarantee:

> And I said, 'Why, after all these years, are you interested in my stuff?' And he said, 'Well, I saw that article you wrote for Living Arts and I thought it was very interesting.' 'What about it made you change your mind?' And he said, 'Before I read that, I didn't know you were serious.'[62]

Inadvertently, Hamilton laid the foundations for others to appreciate the work. And because 'Urbane Image' attempts to set down in words what the graphic works attempt with visual forms, inasmuch as

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., p. 50.

[61] Ibid., p. 7.

[62] Quoted in: Michael Bracewell, *Re-make/Re-model* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 102.

the two are consistent, the common language is apprehended rather than interpreted, grasped rather than explained. 'Urbane Image' circumvents the regular path of critical appreciation written at a remove, i.e. third-party confirmation or paid opinion. It articulates a body of work *on its own terms*, as Hamilton acknowledges: 'I managed to achieve in that text something that was the equivalent of the paintings.'[63]

## 5.10: CODA

Giorgio Agamben closes his 'Notes on Gesture' in *Means Without Ends* with a short meditation on the word 'gag', initially in the most literal sense of 'something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech'.[64] The gag is a device, he writes, that directs attention away from what is being said towards what cannot be said; and by temporarily suspending the possibility of language, the gag points to the phenomenon of language *as such*, and by implication to *what cannot be said*. 'Every great philosophical text', he concludes, 'is the *gag* exhibiting itself, being-in-language itself as a gigantic loss of memory, as an incurable speech defect.'[65]

Agamben's metaphor recalls the American artist Paul Chan's oddly affirmative description of art as trying to say something while choking, i.e. the simultaneous struggle to breathe *and* express the fact that you can't breathe, 'the urgent play of shapes and colours and lines and spaces and sounds that matter most when something is stuck in your throat.'[66] It bears repeating: an attempt to speak (or write) that deliberately draws attention to *the nature of that attempt* as much as what the speaker (or writer) is apparently attempting to say (or write).

> Where we have spoken openly we have revealed nothing, but where we have written in code we have spoken the truth.[67]

Back in *The Open Work*, Eco contrasts contemporaneous French Structuralism with what he calls 'serial thinking'. The two approaches are not incommensurate, he says, but polar opposites. Where the Structuralist identifies and uncovers already existing and increasingly elemental 'codes', the 'serial thinker' *forges* and *realizes* his or her own new 'codes' in the making:

> All messages call into question their code; every act of words constitutes a discussion of language to which it gives life. In its extreme sense this means that every message postulates its own code, that every work of art is the linguistic foundation of itself, the discussion of its own poetic system. It releases itself from the bonds which previously claimed to define and circumscribe it: every work of art is thus the key for its own reading ... The effect of serial

[63] Ibid. Hamilton continued to fold such 'equivalent' words into many later works, where they similarly served as something between self-commentary and tautological reinforcement. As a prime case in point, the 1970 screenprint *Kent State*, based on the crude image of a student shot by police in Ohio, USA, the same year, was accompanied by four paragraphs of text that track the image's transmission from the original cine-film taken by a bystander through myriad channels – satellite, television, photograph, scan, silkscreen – to end up in both gallery and book. The text thus describes what's registered in the extensive 15-colour print, the inevitable degradation and atomization of the image as information is lost the further the image travels from its source: 'That evening, the message is re-transmitted as part of a BBC news broadcast to be detected by a TV receiver; information is decoded and divided among three guns in its cathode ray tube. They spurt out streams of electrons which excite, to varying intensities, spots distributed evenly in triads over the surface of the tube.'.

[64] Giorgio Agamben, op. cit., p. 58.

[65] Ibid., p. 60.

[66] Chan, 'The Spirit of Recession', op. cit , p. 12.

[67] Seth Price, 'Dispersion', op. cit. (unpaginated).

> thinking is the evolution of codes and the discovery of new codes, not a progressive recoil toward the original foundational code.[68]

At this point in the thesis it occurs to me that these chapters are similarly 'serial', and for the same reasons. Rather than advancing an argument step by step, they are parallel means – like a line of Christmas lights in different colours – of generating a more robust, *cubist* sense of forming-as-a-way-of-thinking. Ideally this composite itself constitutes a change in kind, a transformation, generates its own new code – and maybe, too, a code of conduct.

[68] Eco, op. cit., p. 246.




Printing the ‘blind proof’ advert/bond/label for Dexter Sinister and Stählemühle’s Black Whisky,
Edinburgh College of Art, 2009

# 6: BLACK WHISKY AND THE FIRST/LAST NEWSPAPER

The first half of this chapter tells the story of a relatively long-term project on its way to becoming an actual product, a 12-year 'German Scotch' Black Whisky. The second half recalls the relatively short-term turnaround of a temporary printed broadsheet designed to document the news industry in a moment of crisis. Both emphasize markedly telling production processes.

The whisky developed out of a couple of meetings and a published interview with German publisher-turned-distiller Christoph Keller. Christoph had founded the art book imprint Revolver in 1998 and released some 470 volumes over the next six years, but along the way became increasingly disillusioned with the state of both contemporary art and publishing – and particularly the conflation of the two. Amid this malaise, Revolver had expanded to the extent that burgeoning professionalism had begun to supersede the amateur reasons for publishing in the first place. '("Amateur": one who loves.)'[1] In order to resist this inertia, Christoph sold the company in 2004.

## 6.1: HIGH-END SPIRITS

The snatches of conversation that crop up in this section took place one evening on Christoph's farm, Stählemühle, remotely located in the triangle between Stuttgart, Zurich and Lake Constance in South-eastern Germany. The questions were asked by artist Sarah Crowner and myself.[2]

SB: What does the word 'publish' mean to you now, in 2007? I mean, if one party asks another to publish something, what's being solicited? Money? A distribution network? Some form of caretaking, organizing, enforcement of standards, proofing … or something else; 'risk', maybe? None of the various parties involved seem sure precisely what their roles are any more, the nature of the division of labour. Everything's up for grabs, and naturally everyone wants to claim the prestige of involvement while doing the least amount of work.

Of course, in the end the real caretaking – I mean literally taking care, worrying over a project, a book, as opposed to 'organizing' it in a more disinterested sense – typically defaults to the end of the food chain where there's more investment in culture than business; a kind of unconditional love. It's a gross generalization, but I imagine this would ring true to most people involved in arts publishing at the moment.

CK: Yes, and in the last 20 or 30 years there's been a related shift from the publisher being the one who invests, to the whole setup of arts publishing in Europe being subsidized, so it's always state or public money. That's the big difference with the U.S., because every book that's made in the art world in Europe is subsidized in one way or other by some form of public money trickling down to the various institutions – publishers, galleries and museums. Never directly, of course, and no-one ever admits it too loudly.

In the case of Revolver, we started with 30,000 Marks from a friend and made eight books with artists we liked in the first year. We had to do it cheaply, of course, but that stage was paradise. We didn't sell anything, and suddenly the money was gone, so we had to change our whole approach. At which point I started to collaborate with institutions, and realized that the nature of the subsidized funding directly influences the kinds of books that then get commissioned, the types of artists and subjects. On the face of it you have a job, but ultimately you're part of a system to keep people off the street! In this sense it's crazy, and a real problem. On the other hand, without that money there wouldn't be a single book on art … or, at least, even the smallest book would have to sell for something like 120 Euros if calculated according to real costs.

[1] Norman Potter, *What is a designer* [1969], revised 4th edn. (London: Hyphen, 2002), p. 24.

[2] The full conversation is transcribed here: Stuart Bailey, Sarah Crowner, and Christoph Keller, 'Right to Burn: a drink with Christoph Keller', *Dot Dot Dot* #14, 2007.

Revolver was simply an attempt to counteract the existing situation, and I think we actually achieved that, more or less, by the time I bailed out. In my opinion, all these big arts publishing houses today aren't really publishers at all, precisely because they don't take any risks – they don't put money in books at all, they only work with funding institutions. The only ones that are independently viable are Taschen, some Phaidon stuff, and a few obvious large-scale catalogues. For the rest, it's only about generating marketable contexts, and to a lesser degree intellectual contexts – and though it's not necessarily what we like, it does generate a framework.

We met Christoph just as he had sold the company – which subsequently went bankrupt within two years – and was in the process of moving his family from Frankfurt to the countryside. We were curious to find out more about this move, as he appeared to be actually realizing something that friends and colleagues were constantly banging on about. Namely, the possibility of withdrawing from various contemporary rat races, as discussed in such as Jan Verwoert's essay 'Exhaustion & Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform' that we'd published in *Dot Dot Dot* #15:[3]

> How can we address the current changes in our societies and lives? Some say that we have come to inhabit the post-industrial condition – but what does that mean? One thing seems certain: after the disappearance of manual labour from the lives of most people in the Western world, we have entered into a culture where we no longer just work, *we perform* ... But what would it mean to put up resistance against a social order in which high performance has become a growing demand, if not a norm? What would it mean to resist the need to perform? Is 'resistance' even a useful concept to evoke in this context?[4]

Christoph first came across the phrase 'Right to Burn' at the foot of an advert for the farm. Like me, he initially assumed it meant the new owner would inherit the right to raze the building in order to rebuild on the land, but later he learned the phrase was local slang for the license to distil bound up with the terms of the property. The verb 'to distill' is *Brennen* in German, which derives from 'to burn' (the distillation process involves burning produce.) This license is hard to get and so highly coveted, not least because farmers are permitted to pay off a considerable proportion of their taxes by supplying alcohol to the state. The government then (reportedly) puts it to either military or medical use, which implies a fantastically circular ecology. The process is therefore ferociously regulated. Each distillery, however 'amateur', is closely monitored, obliged to surrender 60% of their net output, and required to undertake production at least once every three years.

As it had been two years since the previous owner of Stählemühle had operated the still, Christoph was forced to decide immediately whether to attempt to continue using the still in order to maintain the license. However, being a formidable autodidact and dilettante-enthusiast, rather than work to yield the cheapest, fastest, low-grade tax-relief product like most of the surrounding farms (moonshine, basically; not necessarily intended to be drunk at all), he resolved to attempt the opposite: to produce a high-end alcohol using traditional, laborious methods to process locally-grown organic produce. In that region of Germany, wheat-based spirits are typically distilled with the sugars of various fruits, and according to tradition, all aspects of the process ought to be present in the final taste. In other words, the drinker of a Williams Pear schnaps – Stählemühle's first output – ought to be able to taste the fruit's journey from tree to ground to still to spirit. In other words, with nothing is lost in translation as sugars transform into alcohol.

[3] Verwoert, 'Exhaustion & Exuberance', op. cit. Shortly after Christoph's move to the country, in 2006 I organized a gathering of around 15 people at Stählemühle over a long weekend. Broadly speaking, the idea was to collectively consider Verwoert's cultural diagnosis in a context far removed from the regular schedule of perpetual production. This was effectively the inverse of the setup we'd contrived for *Dot Dot Dot* #15 in Geneva, which involved putting Jan and ourselves into a cartoon version of the condition he was writing about. For more on this see §2.1.

[4] Ibid.: 90, 92

By 2006, he was already winning major industry awards.

SC: The process of publishing seems to parallel that of distilling. Do you think of these bottles in the same way as the books?

CK: The big difference for me is that for all these years we were making books, inevitably giving them away to people, and the reaction is always, oh yeah, yeah, nice, good, thanks … and that's it. With a bottle of schnaps, on the other hand, people will literally tear it away from me – it's amazing! How can I get some? I'll buy a whole box! It's an immediate, genuine reaction, which is hugely rewarding. I keep joking about winning these medals that I don't take too seriously, of course, but sometimes it's good to get some kind of objective opinion about what you're making. It's quite difficult to know for sure because my nose is not so elaborate. I can evaluate books a lot better than I can schnaps, so it's important. Being dilettantes doesn't stop us wanting to make schnaps at a very high level.

SB: But is that 'high level' consonant with Revolver's approach to publishing? – I mean, in relation to what you were saying about creating a context that doesn't exist already: a space, aura, position, community, or however you want to describe it.

CK: With the alcohol it's a bit different, because the traditions are already in place. Unless I make a completely new schnaps, which is virtually impossible, the only thing I can do is give it a new context, with regard to how we make it, then how we present it – to indicate signs of a science or craft, of an alchemist tradition and the sheer effort involved. We use old techniques and believe in associated ideas of purity, anyway, so this way of working fits with the recent general interest in organic production. The only thing I can try to do with the schnaps itself, outside of its presentation, is produce objective quality.

That's the big difference with publishing, because if you want to read one of the art books I've published you have to have studied art history. If I gave any of these books to my farming neighbours they'd immediately ask, How the hell do you make a living out of this? They wouldn't understand it because they don't know about art.

SC: And you don't have to have an education in alcohol to get the schnaps.

CK: Exactly. You simply don't have to be an expert. Of course there are schnaps experts and it's good if they like it too, but ultimately it's about this immediacy of you being able to say, yes, I like this one, or no, I don't like that one so much. Both responses are fine, but it's the visibility and immediacy of the reaction that makes the difference. We were just talking about subsidies in European art, but they're peanuts compared to subsidies in European farming, which is virtually total and so extreme that it's getting to the point where farmers don't care what they harvest any more. It's not important to them because they only get paid for the quantity rather than the quality of whatever they're cultivating.

## 6.2: BLACK ART, TRANSPARENT ART

In the wake of this conversation and a couple of schnaps tasting events that we organized together in New York and Munich, we floated the idea of Dexter Sinister co-producing some particular alcohol with Stählemühle. The idea was to carrying on thinking through the implications of the ideas in Verwoert's 'Exhaustion and Exuberance' essay by pushing them through a concrete production. This would give us the opportunity to actively query those similarities and differences between publishing and distilling. With Stählemühle responsible for the distillation, and Dexter Sinister overseeing its parallel 'publication', the idea evolved into our setting up a co-operative investment scheme, and so we busied ourselves advertising and selling shares in a long-term production. Although this meant the eventual product was bound to be quite exclusive, i.e. a limited product for a closed community of shareholders, numerous tangential forms and formats have since spun off the project, including essays, interviews, talks, and so on.

(Although all parties involved have some investment in what Christoph refers to in the interview as intelligent dilettantism, it's worth emphasizing that we were always intent on working towards a

product that would *at the very least* meet the regular standards of what constitutes a decent drink – a plausible product in its own right, not one excused by its dubious grounding in art.)

CK: Perhaps that's the law of dilettantism: as soon as you start getting interested in something by reading or researching, it automatically gets more interesting, a self-generating energy. Obviously there are a lot of connections between producing alcohol and art because its the same form of experimentation; it's a research-based activity; it involves knowing a lot, doing a lot, and acquiring experience because you can always improve. It's also very time-consuming … but in the end it's fundamentally a beautiful process of alchemy that turns this pile of rotten fruit into this pure white – no, transparent – liquid that smells and tastes fantastic. My fascination with distilling is rooted in the fact that it's such an old technique: 4,000 years old, maybe even 10,000. If you think about the fact that a bunch of people had this idea to heat something up and separate the different evaporation points simply to see what they get from it … such a simple technique and in the end it produces this form of magic.

SB: And it's more satisfying working with a bunch of apricots than, say, Jonathan Meese?[5]

CK: Yes. Well, no, actually … it was also great to work with Jonathan Meese, I have to say. Funnily enough, we actually just made a Jonathan Meese wheat schnaps for a bar he's making in the house where Marx was born. But yes, it is a lot more satisfying and interesting working with fruit farmers than all the various parties usually involved in subsidised publishing, that's for sure.

SB: This implies that some or all of the dissatisfactions of working in publishing we've been talking about are resolved by working in alcohol. Is this because the distribution of labour hasn't changed in the same way? Given the ubiquity of desktop publishing software since the 1980s, the print industry could be thought of as having changed from a secretive 'Black Art' to an openly 'transparent' one. That sounds like a positive thing, but it implies the dissolution of the professional trade, with all its attendent checks, standards and quality controls. Curiously, you just referred to alcohol's transparency in positive terms – as purity.

Anyway, my question [laughs] is: are you out to reclaim something you eventually found lacking in art publishing? Having heard you describe the alcohol industry as extremely traditional, conservative and controlled, it seems impervious to the sort of dissolution that characterizes contemporary publishing. And this is surely emphasized by your relatively minor scale, isolation, interest in the alchemy, and so on. It all seems much more … human-sized.

CK: Yes, absolutely. But also, as a book designer or editor you're not the author – you're more or less a service, and therefore only *more or less* involved. In producing agriculture, though, you're the author … although kind of from God's grace, if you know what I mean.

SC: The apricot is stronger than you!

CK: Kind of, yeah. I don't think of these things in terms of a big unchanging omnipresent creation, because these things can actually be modified. But still, I'm essentially working with material I haven't invented – that's the difference. And I have to find the people who make those things with the same love, because for sure 99% of the quality of this schnaps is the fruit, and only 1% is the art of the distiller.

It might seem to be an isolated process, working out here on the farm, but it's not at all. It involves a community and a network, and this is why I include these small texts on the bottles in addition to the obvious name labels, which go into some detail about the varieties of the spirits, and often include which farmer I got the fruit from – just to point out that you need these specific people to make this specific drink, and all are equally essential.

[5] He had recently made a one-off spirit with Meese, a German artist.

But I like this idea of distilling as a transparent art so much because of what I mentioned about the importance of the objective reaction – or is it subjective? In the end, maybe that's the point: in terms of distilling schnaps, subjective and objective are one and the same.

There's one other thing I can try to relate very quickly. It has something to do with coming from a city to the country with no previous connection to farming, which I can best describe as a fascination for the utterly out-of-balance economy of nature, unlike anything I've ever experienced in a metropolis. Take the salad we were just eating, for example. If I calculate my hours in the sense of what we think of as a regular fee for labour, or even minimum wage, it would cost something like $30, accounting for the time I spend in the greenhouse, seeding, caretaking, and so on – so it's completely out of whack with any economic thinking we've grown up with elsewhere. On the other hand, it's such a great feeling to actually *do* this work, even when it's bad, if it's raining or I'm tired, or things are going wrong … and in the end I work a hell of a lot for a tiny little bit of food.

Again, on paper it's financially crazy because you could go to the best top-quality organic supermarket and buy this salad for much less. But of course there's some other quality that is less easy to define or relate – a feeling, a sense of rightness and equilibrium. It's very simple: I donate a part of my day to work for my food.

We eventually decided our collaborative production would be a whisky, for a few reasons. Above all, personal preference; next, because although Christoph's repertoire had extended considerably (gin, various herb liquors, absinthe), he hadn't yet attempted a whisky; third, being the spirit with the most imposing connoisseur-base, producing a plausible whisky seemed like the biggest challenge; and finally because, in the attendant context of economic meltdown, the whisky industry was reportedly one of the few that continued to thrive (a pattern supposedly historically consistent in times of depression for more or less obvious reasons). Indeed, the whisky industry was frequently in the news around this time (roughly 2008–2010), usually in view of the burgeoning popularity of Japanese brands.

More specifically, we resolved to make a quality Scotch (traditionally made from malt and so distinct from North American Bourbon, traditionally made from corn, or Canadian Rye). More accurately, given the fact that to be legally designated 'Scotch' the process must occur within Scotland itself, we'd actually be making something reasonably equivalent.

There are other rules that govern qualification as Scotch – and that therefore ought to apply to any good imposter, too: its strength by volume must be between 40 and 94.8%, and it must be aged in an oak barrel for a minimum of three years, with superior varieties usually aged for 10, 12, 15 or 18 years. We settled on 12, which seemed an adequately awkward span for a production and product at once both 'practical' and 'gestural'. Certainly, otherwise keen investors baulked when we got round to mentioning the waiting period involved: 12 years is not forever, yet long enough to flush from temporary memory, and this seemed useful in view of the broader allusions we had in mind. As graphic designers we're used to engaging and maintaining an audience by visual means – and that's part of the attraction of the slowness here, too: to coax investment in terms of curiosity and attention, as well as hard cash. This involves a certain amount of seduction, the effort of connection.

In sum, we were after producing a high-end single malt Scotch-type whisky – a 'German Scotch', so to speak. Finally, we decided it ought to be black. It's hard to recall precisely when, how, or why this idea evolved – perhaps simply because it sounded a bit sinister. Christoph had recently manufactured a couple of liqueurs naturally coloured by the pigment of their base herbs, at least one of which was more or less black. We initially presumed we might achieve the same effect with some flavourless pigment, but discovered this was highly inadvisable – not to mention 'illegal' inasmuch as adding any extra ingredients further tips the drink away from properly qualifying as Scotch, which ought to retain the colour, aroma, and taste of the raw materials used during production and maturation.

As it happened, that 'black' ended up referring to something else altogether. Decent whisky is made with 'soft' water (which contains a minimal amount of minerals), hence the vast majority of high-end whisky is often produced in the islands and other remote parts of Scotland, Ireland and Japan, where water is relatively pure in a workable climate. From the outset, Christoph had been concerned that

water sourced locally in Germany would be too ‘hard’ (i.e. mineral-rich), forcing us to have to import softer water from a foreign source which would inflate costs and likely render the entire project unworkable. Then out of the blue, Christoph heard there might be an adequately soft source within a couple of hours’ drive of the farm. He made a quick trip to perform a few routine tests and confirmed that the tip-off was correct. Auspiciously enough, this adequately soft spring was located in the heart of the Black Forest.

And of course the product would eventually circulate within a black market of our own making.

SB: Remember when Jan Verwoert was here on the farm, talking about communities? He started with the simple idea that we’re a self-made community borne out of mutual sympathies – and that this could apply equally to *Dot Dot Dot* or Revolver or the farm. These are groups and relations formed for their own sake, not towards any explicit ends beyond their own continued existence – by which I really mean rather than in view of, say, an explicit Political or Social end. This struck me as one of those things so stupidly obvious that you don’t notice it until suddenly refracted through someone else’s words.

I recently experienced something similar working in our basement bookstore. As dumb as it sounds, I realised for the first time what capitalism was. I mean i *felt* it, not as an abstract system I’m vaguely conscious of being complicit with at some indeterminate remove, but in light of a customer stood in front of me holding a book and asking how much it costs – to which I always have the urge to answer (and sometimes do), ‘whatever you’re willing to pay for it’. In short, I was reminded how value is essentially arbitrary. I guess this is the same hands-on practicality you’re talking about with the farm: primitive in its obviousness but revelatory nontheless.

I’m not sure whether this is leading to a question – maybe only to another drink! – but all these examples seem to describe a kind of circular, self-feeding energy that’s generated not in order to sell, but to sustain. Money is essentially removed from the equation, and the equilibrium involves a balance of other elements instead.

CK: It’s also crucially based in the present rather than the future or on some idea of an end result, an attitude concerned with the here and now, with effort and commitment. It comes back to the various art systems we’re involved in, which – particularly at the moment – revolve around this idea of only doing things because someone else invites you to, or will pay you to, or because you’ll gain some perceived outcome … money, respect, prestige, fame, immortality, more invitations, whatever. The idea of getting together or making something without those preconditions is increasingly rare, and that’s a shift for the worse.

For me, the reasons for spending time growing these things is also just a simple reaction to not being able to find value or satisfaction in other things. Today I can say I’ve never felt more satisfaction than when I spend an afternoon here in the stables, for example. Why should I spend so much time doing things like publishing when I could also spend it generating food and drink for myself and family and friends? That feeling only increases, then it becomes an obsession, because if you have a farm suddenly you’re bound to think about the idea of ‘land’ which, of course, you don’t have to consider in the city. As an artist, at least, you’re now trained to live as flexibly as possible – don’t own anything, have your suitcase packed and ready. But if you’re on a farm, one of the things you find is that you’re suddenly responsible for is the ground, very literally, with a heritage to consider. If we don’t mow the meadows correctly, the farmers next door come and say, hey, this isn’t good enough. There’s an inherent ethos that the land has to be cultivated properly.

Again, it’s simple and obvious: you own something and suddenly it’s important to maintain it. Owning becomes interesting again. Take livestock, for instance, which involves the responsibility for their lives – a completely different relationship to the possessions than the one we’re used to. Spending time with the animals becomes a complex thing, because it’s not solely – or visibly, or immediately – about money. It doesn’t work in the same way.

There was another, more straightforward reason for settling on making a whisky rather than any other alcohol: we were due to spend a few weeks working in Scotland, and anticipated undertaking a certain amount of fundamental research there.

## 6.3: LETTER FROM THE SOURCE

July 2, 2007

Dear Christoph,

As promised, here's a feature-length prose home movie from Scotland. There's been a reassuring amount of whisky drunk in the name of our project, so it may be a little out of focus. In my mind, at least, the trip was going to involve a lot of reading, walking, and recuperation. The previous two weeks in Europe had already been quite involved, and worth recounting in advance of what I'm about to report.

So:

The first stop-off was to install an exhibition in Porto – an iteration of the salon-hang of objects originally reproduced in *Dot Dot Dot* that you saw in Munich last year, now titled *Extended Caption*.[6] A book of the same name constituted half of the show. It contained all of the pages of all of the articles that originally introduced all of the objects, torn and scanned from the original issues. The 'caption', then, is patently impossible to digest in front of the wall, and the wall impossible to digest without any contextualising text; and this double bind was something Jan and I discussed (in front of the wall, in public) a couple of weeks after the opening. Trying to get to the point of such an apparently irritating setup, we arrived at the idea that our discussion – and the gathering of people who came to hear it – was at least part of point. In other words, the work lies precisely (or imprecisely) in the gap between the wall and the book. Now this already sounds like the sort of vague one-liner justification we've become a bit too comfortable with recently, and why the aim of this letter is, conversely, to be as direct as possible.

The second week was spent in London, limbering up for a filmed conversation between Will Holder and myself at Tate Modern. This was one aspect of a piece of work embedded in a small group show called *Stutter*, basically the fifth realisation of a ongoing publishing project of ours called *Tourette's*.[7]

To explain as briefly as possible, we borrowed a piece of work by Michelangelo Pistoletto from the mid-1960s called *Structure for Talking While Standing*, then filmed ourselves leaning on it, talking to each other for an afternoon (again in public) about social changes in art and industry in Britain since the Second World War. The idea was to edit the discussion into a series of short vignettes following, say, five or six threads, to be shown back in the gallery on Tate TV later in the year. Along the way, we were attempting to paraphrase rather than directly quote others, as a development of the previous instances of *Tourette's*. We also published a four-page 'Publick Notice', available to take away from the same space. This was a bunch of notes based on our discussions with Pistoletto and the *Stutter* curators about the politics of borrowing or replicating the piece.

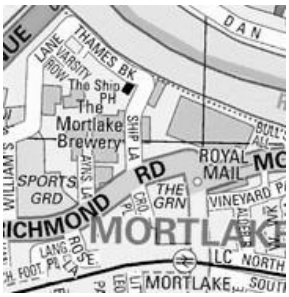
[6] *DDDG: Extended Caption*, Culturgest, Porto, 2009. See also the accompanying book: Stuart Bailey, ed., *DDDG: Extended Caption* (Amsterdam: ROMA, 2009). More on this project in §2.3(d).

[7] See chapter 2, fn. 11, and the 'Publick Notice' in the Appendix.



In the days leading up to this recording, we made several walks across London trying to hone what we wanted to talk about, to reach some productive cusp between having discussed the stuff we wanted to cover enough to be able to speak about them lucidly enough for an audience to follow along, while simultaneously open enough to develop a genuine, live conversation, i.e. with an element of surprise, not knowing what the other person's going to say next. It was very useful to walk and talk, not least because we began to point out examples of what we were discussing in the immediate environment.

One example of this that didn't make it into the filmed version was an afternoon spent searching for a pub (we later discovered it was called The Ship) that I'd been to once beforehand some 15 years ago. It's at a place called Mortlake in Sheen, a district on the south bank of the Thames. The pub had stuck in my mind because it was next to a large brewery that manufactured the UK version of Budweiser, which is supposedly nothing like the North American one. There had been a pipe running directly from the factory floor to the bar. According to a friend of mine who used to work there, it was a fairly well-kept secret and the best pint in London.




This recollection effectively distilled a large part of what we had ended up talking about – namely, the increasing distance between products and consumers. Not only the geographical distance between, say, a toy made in Taiwan and a kid playing with it in California, but also in the more abstract sense of division between a product's essence (a cup of coffee) and its presentation (a *Moccacino*). This might be better variously articulated as products 'mediated beyond their essential state', or 'wrapped in the quotation marks of "identity" or "lifestyle"', or again, 'less what they are and more what they're trying to come across as being'. In short, the cause and effect of the exacerbation of branding.

We talked about how design has become synonymous with mediation; how mediation could be conceived either positively as something like 'translation' or negatively as something akin to 'spin'; and how the latter has gained such an upper hand as to be now more or less *synonymous* with design.

This is why we tend to want to have nothing to do with the field, or at least try to work on terms outside such assumptions and associations – if not just switch to another discipline altogether.

We evenutally found The Ship, only to discover, of course, that while the brewery itself was still there (under threat of closure), that direct pipe to the superior Budweiser was long gone. The bar now served *the usual*, and it had been visibly spun into some common denomination hybrid sports bar-gastropub. We started to consider this shift in terms of those contrasting models of corporate expansion, vertical and horizontal integration. Where horizontal integration describes the act of assimilating other companies that produce the same product (or supply the same service) in view of monopolizing the market, vertical integration involves assimilating the various subsidiary processes of manufacture. In the case of, say, a liquid soap company, this could refer to activities as diverse as producing their own bottles and labels, running in-house rather than third-party distribution, or setting up dedicated sales outlets.

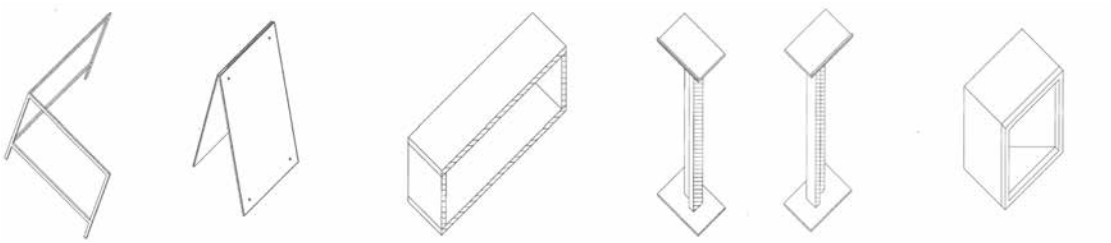
The old version of The Ship suggests vertical integration (factory and bar once intimately linked, both constituent of a local, independent brewery) and the 'redesigned' one horizontal integration (factory and bar now discrete, run according to the standardized templates of international conglomerates). And as you might expect, we're firmly on the side of those qualities implied by the older, vertical model, i.e. the particular, the local, the self-contained and fully-realized, and against those implied by the horizontal, i.e. the bland, the ubiquitous, the surface-deep and soon-to-be-obsolete.

We had the benefit of a practice public conversation in advance of the Tate filming, midweek at a smaller London gallery, where we staged a trial conversation before of a modest audience for a couple of hours. The idea was to get used to speaking in public both to each other and to others; and to assimilate the immediate feedback of the situation in view of putting things across more expediently, live-editing the relative accessibility of our language, assumptions and examples.

The point of recounting all this was to say that, on arriving in Scotland on the back of this week in London, our time there was coloured by an unusually focused series of events. I wasn't expecting Edinburgh to be so overwhelmingly social. This was partly happenstance, as I arrived at the same time as a swarm of people up from London to see a bunch of stuff centred on a Cerith Wyn Evans show at Inverleith House. But it was also because the presence of anyone passing through the art school apparently serves to galvanize the local scene. Unusually, this scene comprised people from all parts of the school; not only teachers and students, but also sundry bureaucrats, directors, secretaries and alumni, along with an eccentric crowd of local benefactors, collectors, curators and gallerists. It felt unusually heterogeneous. Naturally, a good deal of the talk ended up at whisky – on a loop of drinking and thinking about drinking.

In the middle of all this it became clearer that, as you're obviously in charge of the actual distillation, our job is to provide the frame through which the product's perceived – the container, the packaging. This is a slightly uncomfortable realization in light of my ranting about branding a few paragraphs ago. And yet the premise here is a little more complicated than that, because the raw material of this idea isn't *just* the whisky, but equally the structure that surrounds it – its co-operative setup. It's a two-fold venture, a product and a gesture, to be drunk and contemplated. It should both *be* a whisky – a *good* whisky – and, to an unusual degree, *be about* whisky, too.

Soon after David showed up, we were obliged to deliver a lecture at the National Gallery, and decided to end by talking about the whisky project in order to announce the availability of shares. To get there, we first related a few previous projects in order to posit the whisky as an instance of publishing in its broadest sense.



We'd recently drawn some very simple axonometric drawings of some very simple pieces of furniture we'd designed, produced and put to use in diverse contexts. On one hand, each performs its obvious function (e.g., a shelf to display and store books; a pair of twin lecterns to read from in public); but they're equally conceived as 'models' in the sense that they're also *about* that function (e.g. the shelf represents the idea of dispersing information; the lecterns are an emblem of formal public speaking). You could say they're simultaneously utilitarian and poetic, or again, functional and gestural. That's what we were aiming for, anyway.

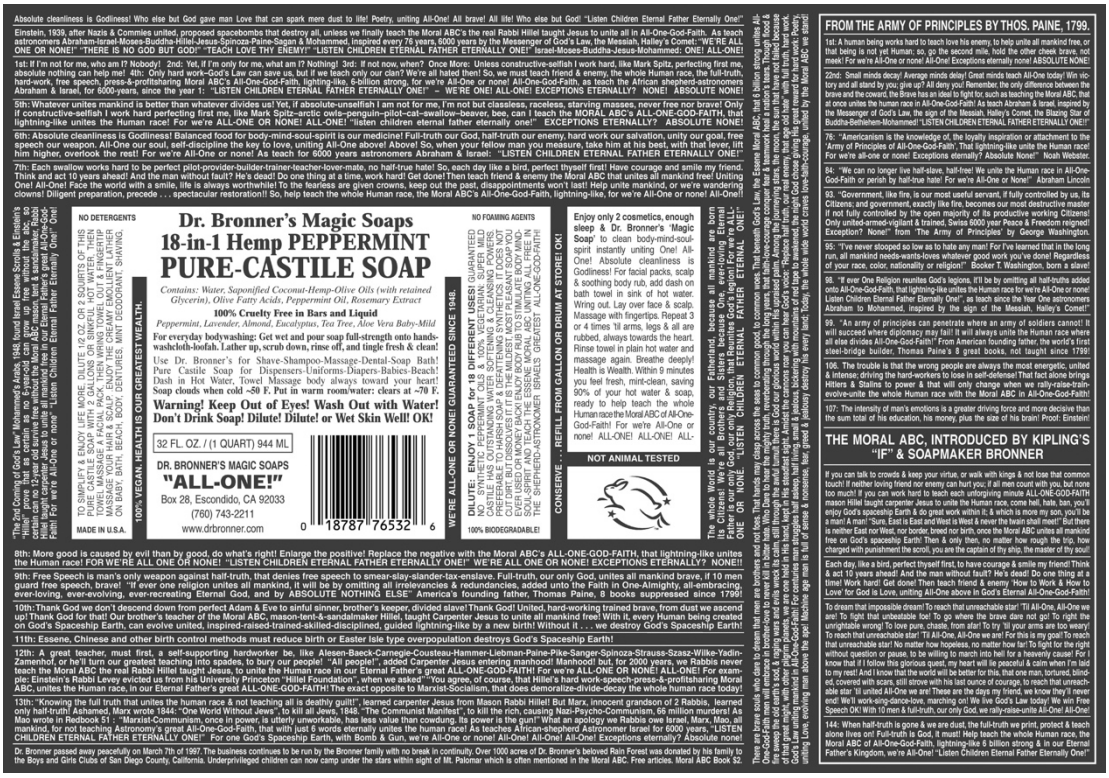
During the talk we spoke a bit about Stählemühle and your schnaps, juxtaposing you with the story of Dr Bronner's Pure-Castille soap. You might recall this product from a piece by Dmitri Siegel in an early issue of *Dot Dot Dot*.[8] Bronner was a Jewish immigrant and ex-mental patient who invented a liquid soap in order to disperse a fairly entertaining and not entirely unconvincing quasi-religious holism that boils down to the minimal message 'ALL-ONE!'

The product still sells well – it's a good soap. But it's also notorious in the U.S. for its wacko packaging that relates Bronner's righteous self-help guide, his 'moral ABC' manifest in something like 5,000 words of miniscule type on the labels on the bottles and bars of the soap. He was a philanthropist as well as a nutjob, and though he died some years back, the company remains a family business with a huge output that's widely considered a model in terms of employee relations and social accountability.

You might say, then, that Bronner's soap wisely remains close to its source – a model of vertical integration that's resisted selling out its founding principles. But the real interest for us lies in the product's two-fold nature. First, it's an unusual instance of *a product invented to distribute its packaging*, not the other way round. Second, the product and its philosophical message are symbiotic in the sense that the Doctor's sermon equates *oneliness* with *cleanliness*. Moreover, it does so in a way that's far more convincing than many equivalent New Age-y products, which I put down to the rigour of it's idiosyncrasies. That's to say, Bronner's weirdness doesn't seem contrived but genuinely far-out. Or, contrary to what I described before relative to the exacerbation of branding, *it is what it is* rather than what it wants to come across as being: a decent soap with a direct philosophy.

Here's a lesson for our incipient whisky, then. Bronner's soap fulfils its dual aims and claims – a spiritual agent and a cleaning agent – because product and packaging are likewise equally weighted: it's demonstrably ALL-ONE!

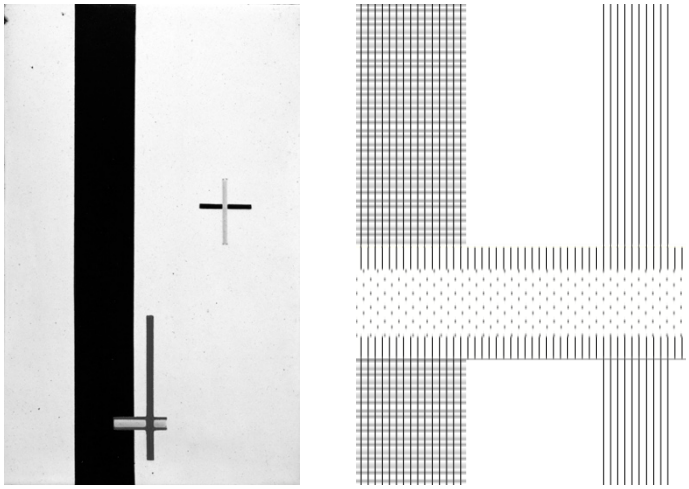
[8] Dmitri Siegel, 'Message on a Bottle', *Dot Dot Dot* #12, 2006.




By contrast, someone had brought along to our talk a bottle of an existing, literally black whisky called Loch Dhu ('Black Lake' in Gaelic, though no such lake exists). We'd heard about this 10-year old pseudo-Scotch from two locals: Alan Johnston, a local artist and teacher, and Charlie McLean, an international whisky authority responsible for several books on the subject. According to both, Loch Dhu enjoyed some fleeting notoriety in the whisky world, a novelty brand aggressively marketed at the U.S. market that never took off. The bottle at the talk was purportedly borrowed from someone's neighbour, so we were only allowed a modicum. It wasn't exactly awful, but it wasn't Scotch as we know it (more like whisky-flavoured molasses, which it turned out wasn't too far from the truth). From here on we were careful to explain upfront that the black in *our* product won't refer to its colour.

Incidentally, 'tincture' is synonymous with both 'colour' and 'medicine'. And as you likely know already, old spirits were often referred to as a 'tincture of …' followed by the name of the base herb. Auspiciously enough, we've already made a bunch of work involving tinctures in recent years – all rooted in our continuing interest in heraldry. In the middle ages, when heraldic devices (coats of arms) were depicted in monochrome printing, colours were graphically translated using a system of black-and-white cross-hatching, dots and other specific patterns. Similarly, graphic elements and their configuration – bars, divisions, shapes, animals, plants, weapons, etc. – are described using a precise vocabulary and native grammar originally derived from French aristocracy.

Here's an image of one of artist and teacher Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's series of *Telephone Paintings* from 1923 – a small set of modernist abstractions that Moholy supposedly ordered from a paint factory by referring to a diagram over the phone. The firm then manufactured the same abstraction in various sizes according to the same instructions. Next to it is a detail of a heraldic tincture-based translation of a *Telephone Painting* that we produced as a 'lithographic proof print' a year or so ago:



We were simply interested to see what happened when we translated Moholy's abstraction, originally painted in red, blue, yellow and black enamels, into the cross-hatched tinctures of heraldry (above is a detail of the lower cross). This led to our writing a text (or phone call) addressed to Moholy, but that's another story.[9] For now, I only want to point to the particular bit of cross-hatching made from vertical and horizontal lines in this detail of the broad vertical strip: this is the abstraction of 'sable', the heraldic term for black. More on this in a minute.

During our last week here we'd managed to get ourselves invited to one of the two local members-only whisky societies. This one was in Leith, the waterfront district that merges with Edinburgh proper. Though Leith has always been the rough, industrial end of the city, this particular club was housed in a stately Georgian, dark-panelled drawing room with a single picture window that looked out onto a dilapidated housing block. Each season these clubs order stock from more-or-less local distilleries, then sell it by the bottle or the glass until each batch runs dry. Our group of four made it through 14 different kinds in one long evening. To give you some idea of the nuance involved, the one I remember most was described on the menu as having an aftertaste of 'burnt Formula One tyres' – and it did.

The passive aggressive formal/informal interior of this place seemed like the blueprint of an idea we've had for some time now: to establish what we've been thinking of calling a 'Serving Library'. The nascent idea of this institution – part club, part reading room – is built on a few disparate influences, rooted in a conversation I had in Los Angeles with British artist Nick Relph some months ago. At the time, he and his colleague Oliver Payne were conceiving a short film that would be set in an abandoned public library in West Hollywood. Apropos of this, we started discussing some kind of hybrid between library and bar, then simultaneously remembered this passage from *Renegade*, the recent ghost-written autobiography of Mark E. Smith, vocalist of The Fall:

> I had an advance from Polygram, the record label. I wasn't living it up or anything. I spent a lot of time in these small, specialized science and law libraries. They were the perfect places to go and kill a few hours before you had a drink. I'd peruse all these great psychiatric reports and law files. I spent a lot of time in there, just reading bits and pieces from these strange papers. It was like a second education in a way. I'd never read anything quite like that before. And, more importantly, it was all free. Anybody was allowed in there. It's not closed off like it is here, where only a doctor knows what a doctor does. You could have a cig in some of them as well. Some fellows used to bring hip flasks in; you'd see them sipping away while reading about the 19th-century law. It was very civilized. That's how it should be in England. Go into a library around here and

[9] See: Dexter Sinister, 'Blazon 4 Moholy-Nagy', *Portable Document Format* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009).

> you've got a lot of repressed stormtroopers gawking at you. It's no wonder kids don't read as much as they used to.[10]

Nick and Oliver went on to make a short video that takes raw footage of the interior of the empty Hollywood library and populates with crude Google Sketchup renderings of books and booze, along with a few nominal humans: an artist's impression of this phantom institution.

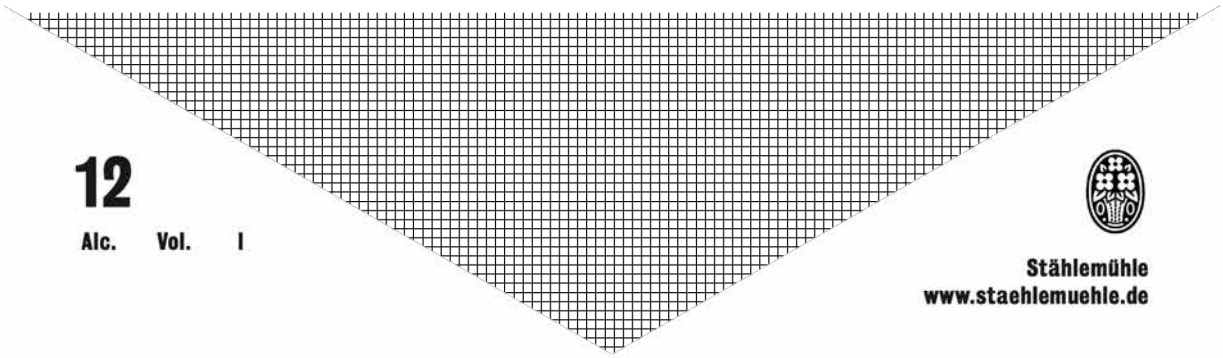
At which point we decided that, in tandem with your various researches about the whisky's distillation, we ought to articulate and refine our ideas about how to *frame* it by trying to summon a suitable form. This form, we concluded, would need to serve three purposes: (1) as an advert or announcement, (2) as a share certificate or trust bond, and (3) as the eventual label for the eventual bottle.

In each of the various contexts we could anticipate 'publishing' this three-fold *thing*, we figured that one of these three aspects would dominate, while usefully alluding to the other two – and so indicate that we're as interested in the community that assembles to fund the product, as we were are in working outside the default mechanisms of profit and surplus, as we are in the drink itself. *Not greater than, but equal to.* And we decided to work this composition out 'live' in movable metal type, in the print room at Edinburgh College of Art, i.e. to write it *while* typesetting it, in view of printing it on a nearby Heidelberg letterpress machine.

Our writing, along with any 'extra-textual' aspects, would then be productively governed by the technology's severely circumscribed means of articulation (a restricted number of available fonts, the strict bounds of the printing frame, etc). Otherwise put, we would embrace the circumstances in order to make an emphatically in-progress piece of work, in which the graphic and linguistic semantics are clearly 'all-one'.

Here's what we ended up with:

[10] Mark E. Smith, *Renegade* (London: Viking, 2008), p. 174.




The bottle you hold in your hands is
a contract, executed some 12 years ago.
As one of a community of cooperators,
you agreed to pay per cent of the total
production costs (this container, its contents).

The contract you hold in your hands is
a bottle, due around 2021.
As one of a community of cooperators,
you agree to receive an equal per cent
of the total product (this bottle, its whisky).

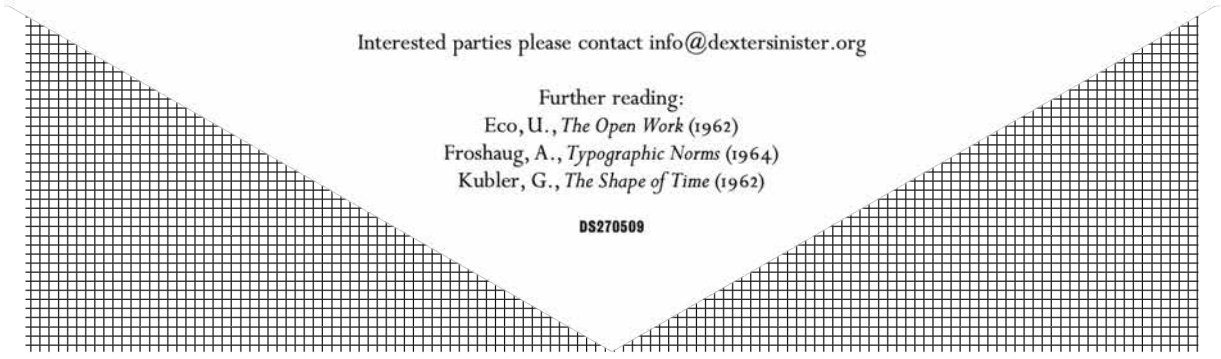
# Black Whisky

Between the agreement and its isomorphic
translation to spirit, nothing was lost
and there is no surplus. (All one.)
This process is transparent—regarding tax,
there has always been a black market.
The product is published by Dexter Sinister,
New York City, U.S.A., and made available
at the Serving Library.
Form must be a way of thinking.
Set in Edinburgh, 2009.

See *Message on a Bottle* (2006), www.servinglibrary.org

Between the raw material and its isomorphic
distillation to spirit, nothing will be lost
and there will be no surplus. (All one.)
This vessel is transparent—regarding tax,
there will always be a parallel circuit.
The alcohol will be distilled at Stählemühle,
Eigeltingen-Münchhöf, Germany,
using water from the Black Forest.
Content must be a way of drinking.
Set in Edinburgh, 2009.

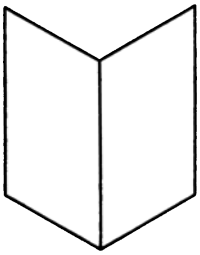
See *Right to Burn* (2007), www.servinglibrary.org




**Proof** **Tincture**

And here's a stab at unravelling how this ad-bond-label came to look-read the way it does, so far as I can recall:

– The overall shape and fundamental left/right division of the design is based on the classic optical illusion of an inverted book, with its spread of 'pages' alternately projecting inwards and outwards. We're intending to adopt this as an emblem for that aforementioned Serving Library; and, just as I described our working out how to frame of the whisky by following the lead of letterpress technology, the whisky is itself one means of working out what this embryonic Serving Library could be (not least an outlet for the spirit 12 years hence). Anyhow, the negative silhouette of the double rhomboid that sets the basic structure of the ad-bond-label is defined by three triangles 'coloured' with heraldic sable, i.e. that vertical/horizontal cross hatching that translates as 'black'.



– The relative scale of the composition's various elements – and the relations between them – were directly determined by the type available in the workshop. We made several false starts. We'd begin working with a certain fount (meaning a specific size of a specific typeface: 14-point Perpetua Roman), then gradually realize we'd likely run out of the limited supply of (say) the letter 'e' before being able to finish a whole paragraph. Each time we'd start over using a smaller fount with larger quantities of letters – all again *while* in the process of writing the text itself (which meant there was no 'raw material' to speak of, no free-floating 'content' apart from and in advance of its container).

– Parallel to this last point, the two columns of text and their nearly duplicated text were set/written in practical response to our mounting realization that, with only three days to undertake the whole enterprise before leaving Edinburgh (which meant setting, printing, dismantling and redistributing the various founts back to their original cases), we had neither type nor time to set much more than one paragraph. Hence we ended up writing interchangeable paragraphs on 'distilling' and 'publishing' based on the same template text, so we could first print the left hand side, quickly switch out certain words and clauses, then shift the frame across and print the right hand one.

– A few other bits of auxiliary information are allocated as logically as possible within the surrounding space, including: the whisky's age; links to Stählemühle and Dexter Sinister; three pointers to 'further reading' that reference some of the broader thinking around the project generally, and this piece of letterpress specifically (see §6.5 below); a date-stamp; and those allusive terms 'Proof' and 'Tincture'. We'd come to realize there are a number of pertinent homonyms native to this project, not to mention the wonderful time-mind/spirit/ghost of *zeitgeist* as you pointed out during our interview:

> There are two different ways to make schnaps. One is to distil the actual fruit, and the alcohol is produced from the sugar in the mash, which carries the aroma with it — this is what is called *fermenting*. The other is to take neutral alcohol and mix it with the fruit. Instead of fermenting, the neutral alcohol sucks the aroma out of the fruit. The process used largely depends on the type of fruit, and the latter is better for raspberries. We've always used the first method, however, which involves the *geist* – a beautiful word, because it means ... well, yes, it means *spirit* ... like *zeitgeist* — the spirit of the times.'[11]

[11] Bailey, Crowner, and Keller, op. cit., p. 89.

As you know, ‘whisky’ derives from the Scottish Gaelic term *uisge beatha*, or ‘water of life’ (in Latin: *aqua vitae*). It was co-opted into English as *usquebaugh*, then gradually aged into whisky. When finally ready to print, we found we were unable to get an even impression of ink. It turned out the type was so old that it was basically too degraded and irregular to produce a relief even enough to yield a reasonably legible print. After wasting a day or so trying to improve or otherwise work the situation this, it dawned on us to roll with the failure and instead print it ‘blind’, meaning without ink; to emboss the paper rather than mark it and so literally create a ‘ghost’ impression. In fact this technique is already commonly used to proof metal type – the form run without ink so as to check for mistakes without needing to clean up each time. And so we ended up ‘proofing’ as an end in itself.

There’s a fantastic article in the upcoming *Dot Dot Dot* (#18, printing on Monday and subtitled ‘Set in Edinburgh’, with the ad-bond-label on its back cover) called ‘The Uneditor’, in which American graphic designer Mark Owens interviews Canadian ‘textual scholar’ Randall McLeod.[12] McLeod’s subject is medieval books and other early printed matter, only he *looks at* rather than *reads* them, preoccupied with the material qualities of printed matter. Moreover, he’s a self-described ‘uneditor’ who’s ‘into demolition’, a maverick academic with a self-appointed crusade against what he considers the irresponsible arrogance of unwarranted claims about early printed matter by self-appointed ‘authorities’. In more broadly philosophical terms, you might say he’s against all forms of absolutism, all claims to ‘truth’. Best of all, his writing is entirely in line with this attitude: propulsive, inventive, playful and loose, it demonstrates what he insinuates.

To give you some idea of the jaw-dropping level of detail at which McLeod typically works, at some point during the interview he recounts his study of the ghostly imprint of the ‘bearer type’ left on the page in a certain copy of an early printed book from 1501, the *Philostratus*. In manual typesetting (such as we used in Edinburgh), bits of type, lead spaces and other bits of ‘furniture’ are typically locked tight into a frame that must be entirely stable in order to print properly. ‘Bearer type’ is the name of un-inked type that can be locked in below the surface of the relief in order to fill excess space, but which, if any single impression happens to be strong and deep enough, can inadvertently leave its own slightly embossed imprint, that’s only really legible by shining raking light to pick out the shadow of its relief. Naturally, when we came to emboss our Black Whisky design instead of printing it, McLeod’s bearer type and raking light were on our minds.

And so in the final analysis, the fact that there wasn’t a ‘final’ inked impression at all, only a relief, a halfway version, seemed wholly consonant with the fact that the entire process was conceived not in view of producing an object per se, but foremost as a means of working out the configuration of a text.




As you’ve seen, we’ve since recreated the form as a fully legible positive black-on-white version too, in order for it to be printed or digitally displayed in other media (it wouldn’t be a very good advert otherwise). The non-printing, relief version served foremost as a catalyst to *coax* that triplicate form.

[12] Mark Owens, ‘The Uneditor’, *Dot Dot Dot* #18, 2009.

All of which amounts to the sense in which we've since been referring to what we made in Edinburgh as a 'blind proof'.

The first purpose this ad-bond-label will serve is in its capacity as an advert for the sale of the cooperative shares. It's already due to appear in a variety of upcoming magazines and books, as well as that new issue of *Dot Dot Dot*. Incidentally, there are a couple of thematic threads running through this issue to do with the automobile and newspaper industries – both of which are obviously in the throes of crisis right now. As such, they make for odd counterparts to the whisky, which, as I said, not only survives but apparently *thrives* during times of economic depression such as the one we're living through. Salut!

Stuart, DS

## 6.4: HANGOVERS

P.S. The last day of blind printing on our last day in Edinburgh was a little shaky. The previous night we'd invited around 15 people to dinner, including that Scotch guru I mentioned, Charlie McLean. By sheer force of personality, Charlie became the evening's compere, and his opening 'So why the hell are we here?' precipitated a knockabout discussion, by turns informative, aggressive, rambling, and contentious. For no good reason, Joseph Kosuth showed up around 11pm with another bottle.

One thing that stays with me from that night is how, despite all the talk, Charlie didn't really ever seem to grasp what we were up to. Because we were approaching this from some oblique art angle, I think he imagined we were somehow interested in *representing* whisky over and above *making* it, and couldn't get past this idea. (Explaining Dexter Sinister as a 'publishing concern' hardly helped.) On reflection, trying to explain the project to such an oddball group while inebriated didn't exactly lubricate understanding. But this is why I noted that public *Extended Caption* in Porto back at the start of this letter, during which Jan Verwoert and I far more soberly discussed the gap between the work on the wall and the work in the book: we were struggling to make roughly the same point around the table in Edinburgh – that the real work lies *in between* all the production. The objects or artefacts or props or products are merely catalytic converters. Well, not really 'merely', more 'profoundly' – if profound could sound un-profound.

I'm well aware that all this could easily come across as elevating a night out, a drink and a chat, to some pretentious state of art. Only I'd argue again (it seems important to keep reminding ourselves of this point) that it's both a drink and *about* the drink. This is the sense in which I think of all we do as 'models': situations set up to allow ourselves and others *to observe ourselves and others in those situations*. One of the best things about the ICA's *Talk Show* month[13] (which was on at the same time) was how the gatherings that took place in the wake of its many performance evenings seemed so unusually full of people directly discussing the work rather than the usual random chatter – a real talk show after the event. There was a giddiness and an urgency that I haven't felt for some time. I think this is what we're preoccupied with, too – setting up events that nurture a bit of urgency; something to get hold of and throw around, like a bottle.

P.P.S. There's one other thing (and this really is the last, I promise) that stays rattling around my head from talking with Charlie McLean at that last supper. In his opinion, our freshly pressed ad-bond-label (which was being passed around to solicit co-operator-investors) was, frankly, pretentious. Pressed to be more specific, he told us that, in his days as a copy-editor, whenever he and his colleagues came across a word like 'isomorphic' (as on our proof), they marked it in red ink 'E.G.O.*'* – a disparaging acronym for a reader's *Eyes Glossing Over*. As far as he could see, he said, we had first be far clearer about what it is we wanted to make, and why; and having established that, *then* design the label – and the whisky – in view of those stated ends. At which point it became clear that this was crux of the misunderstanding. Charlie was patently (for better or worse) talking about giving form to an idea fixed

[13] See §4.8 (exhibition details in fn. 27).

in advance, while we were patently (for better or worse) talking about working that idea out by doing it. We were talking precisely at odds, at cross-purposes.

On the other hand, there was a mysterious presence at the dinner called Chloe who, so far as we could establish, was an academic from Dundee who fundraises in the arts for medical research, and an autodidact equally familiar with the intricacies of hot metal type and alcohol distillation. In contrast to Charlie, she seemed to intrinsically understand all we were struggling to explain.

Ultimately this is, of course, a large part of the point too: to talk about things we don't yet quite know how to say. This is the sound of *Tourette's* – when you just can't stop yourself failing to articulate. It reminds me of Deleuze and Guattari's phrase 'to make language stutter',[14] and Paul Chan's description of art as 'the urgent play of shapes and colours and spaces and sounds that matter most when something is stuck in one's throat'.[15]

We could perhaps caricature Charlie as the Resident Expert, entrenched in a specific discipline, and Chloe as the Transient Polymath, flitting across many fields. It struck me recently that what's common to all the characters that frequent *Dot Dot Dot* (yourself included) is precisely this free-ranging set of interests that fosters a generalist attitude or approach; and that the work made by these multitaskers betrays that way of thinking. Seriously loose, it reaches beyond the confines of what we could call any 'founding' subject. Or, to return to the term that cropped up in our interview – which I suspect is actually borrowed from Brian Eno – it manifests an 'intelligent dilettantism'.[16]

This brings us up to date. The next step is to disperse this ad-bond-label. Alongside all the print and web ads, there seem to be a few upcoming opportunities to show the raking-light proofs in various vitrines, windows, gallery offices, stores, and other liminal art spaces. Supposing that this works and we sell shares, clearly the next step is to calculate the total cost of production then work backwards to fix the co-operative share price. So: could you write us an inventory of projected costs, including all labour, shipping, water transport, storage, and whatever else? I suppose we also need to account for longer-term aspects – licensing, the eventual bottle, its label, and so on.

In Scotland we found out that, due to some historical butterfly effect, any Scotch worth the name has to ferment in a used *Bourbon* barrel. From my cursory research, it seems these can only be bought direct from the source: Kentucky, U.S.A. So I guess we need to start looking into getting one from the middle of nowhere over here to the middle of nowhere over there.

At the end of the day, these three anchor points – Scotland, Germany, and the U.S.A – nicely diagram our triangular production.

## 6.5: FURTHER READING

The mini-bibliography at the lower apex of the ad-bond-label references three key influences on its final form. Foremost, Eco's *Open Work* (1962) alludes to our appropriation in the left column of his maxim 'form must be a way of thinking',[17] mirrored on the right by something approaching a non-

[14] See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* [1975, French] (Minneapolis, MA: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)

[15] Chan, 'The Spirit of Recession', op. cit., p. 12.

[16] Sure enough: 'For me the great strength of dilettantism is that it tends to come in from another angle. It doesn't always, of course. The other way of being a dilettante is just by doing the most pedantic and obvious things. But an intelligent dilettante will not be constrained by the limitations of what's normally considered possible. He won't be frightened, he's got nothing to lose. You know, a person who has his career at stake on every piece of work is obviously going to be a bit more defensive about what he does, whereas the dilettante who just kind of says, oh, I'll try this for a while, is not so frightened of failure, I would imagine. But to maintain a dilettante attitude consciously is also rather suspicious.' Brian Eno quoted in: Dan Fox, 'Refracted Light Through Armory Show', *Dot Dot Dot* #17, 2008.

[17] See chapter 1.

sequitur, ‘content must be a way of drinking’. The point of including it here is to draw attention to the particular way in which the composition’s own formative process – a ‘print’ assembled from a specific collection of moveable metal type at a particular time and place – pre-empted our own ‘way of thinking’ about and around the subject, as related in the previous section.

It’s difficult to say what the second ‘Further reading’ reference is, exactly. Properly speaking, Anthony Froshaug’s *Typographic Norms* (1964) isn’t a book, booklet or pamphlet. It’s not even really a ‘text’; and it’s certainly not an artwork (though it’s certainly as poetic as it is practical: ‘beautiful constellations; mysterious reports on typography’, according to Robin Kinross.[18]) It’s somewhere in the realm of concrete poetry, probably closest to the word/image symbiosis of the calligram, but most accurately summed up as a ‘sample chart’ or ‘possibility diagram’. Physically speaking, it consists of a number of Chinese-folded sheets, hole-punched to be collected into a ring binder or by independently binding with screws, plus an unpunched blurb sheet.

Froshaug was a Norwegian-born typographer who also wrote and taught.[19] He worked predominantly in and around London from the 1940s onwards. One of few practitioners to fully grasp and attempt to introduce principles of continental modernism into Britain, on two separate occasions he temporarily relocated to remote Cornwall to undertake what can reasonably be considered deliberate experiments in austerity in terms of both life and work, and produced a modest range of remarkably precise ephemera and modest booklets, all set and printed by himself in metal type on a small hand-operated press. Alongside local, commissioned work, Froshaug worked on many of his own assignments designed to explore the potential of his technical setup, making the most of strictly limited means. As opposed to ‘experimental printing’ in the sense more typically associated with artists’ books (those of Dieter Rot, for example), these pieces undertake precise arrangements according to fixed meaning.[20]

*Typographic Norms* is an extreme instance of such an exercise, charting the extent of typographic possibility inherent in the standardized components native to a particular technology – in this case, the metal type machines of the Kynoch Press. It’s is a tabular manifestation of the mechanical support, the spaces *between* units of type rather than the type itself, ‘a visual-verbal presentation of defining materials and concepts of typography’:[21] Froshaug first tabulates the standard numerical values of line-spacing elements, then repeats the same in purely graphic form. Solid impressions of these modular ‘blanks’ are configured to show their interrelations as ‘the most tangible way of conceiving the coordinates of typography.’[22] The charts on this spread, for example, show the sizes of standard pieces of lead used to space lines of type ascending from left to right and top to bottom in both numerical (on the left) and physical form. Its horizontal axis runs to its own ‘natural’ length (on later pages showing larger components, the paper scrolls laterally as far as both necessary and convenient, and is then leperello-folded down into the document’s closed A4 format).

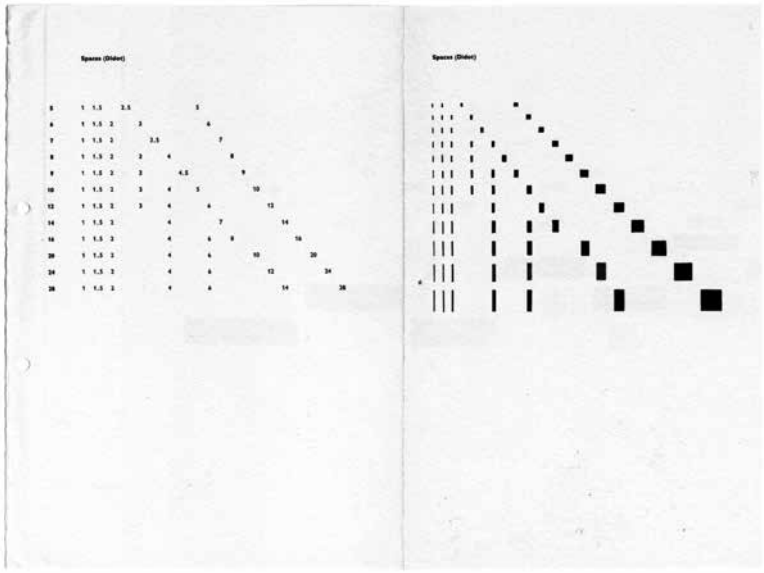
[18] See: Robin Kinross, ed., *Anthony Froshaug: Typography & Texts (*London: Hyphen, 2000), p. 71

[19] See both volumes: Kinross, Robin (ed.), *Anthony Froshaug: Documents of a Life / Typography & Texts* (London: Hyphen, 2000).

[20] See for example the card shown and described in §1.7.

[21] Kinross (ed.), *Anthony Froshaug: Typography & Texts*, op. cit., p. 71.

[22] Ibid.



The title and publisher's names on the cover already refer to this pronounced materiality, printed in black ink on black card, heat-embossed and slightly raised. This is followed by an exhaustive introductory note. Froshaug begins: 'Two constraints are imposed by the Kynoch Press on the designer of any one of these ephemera: a page format of A4 and a top limit of production cost. Apart from these, the designer is free to impose his own.'[23] He then cycles through all the reasoning that went into the document. In this way, *Typographic Norms* helps others working at the press understand the extent of its possibilities. By literally diagramming the machines' standardized components, the document renders visible what's usually vaguely conceived in the abstract, and so potentially dismantles habitual thinking by offering a complete overview of alternate means. It is thus quite literally an exemplary object: 'When all the imposed and self-imposed constraints thus interact and reinforce each other, the consequent design only synthesizes analytics; the arbitrary is minimized.'[24]

In sum, *Typographic Norms* was a useful model for the ad-bond-label on two counts: as a means of conceiving the possibilities of moveable metal type, and as an example of what it means to make a form that manifests its mode of production.

The final bibliographic reference is to George Kubler's polite polemic *The Shape of Time* (1962).[25] Kubler argues against what he perceives as the prevailing approach to art history, founded on conceiving of artworks art as *symbolic expression* that communicate more or less hidden, discrete 'meanings'. He advocates instead (a return to) primarily conceiving of art as *form*; form as meaningful in and of itself, that is, not just in reference to a secondary level semantics.

This idea is consonant with Eco's conception of form as thinking-in-action rather than a vehicle for an essentially discrete, preconceived thought. It also appears to reassert Greenberg's historical justification of 'formalism':

> the avant-garde saw the necessity of an escape from ideas which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society. Ideas came to mean subject matter in general ... This meant a new and greater emphasis on form, and it also involved the assertion of the arts as independent vocations, disciplines and crafts, absolutely

[23] Ibid., p. 180.

[24] Ibid., p. 181.

[25] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

> autonomous, and entitled to respect for their own sakes, and not merely as vessels of communication.[26]

Elsewhere Greenberg writes that 'In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns upon the medium of his craft', but is careful to add that

> The nonrepresentational or 'abstract', if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extraverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in *the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former*. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature.[27]

And this is the essence of Greenberg's seminal conception of Modernism as 'the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.'[28]

Kubler, on the other hand, is not out to 'entrench disciplines' or 'preserve their autonomy', but quite the opposite: he wants to shake up the prevailing ontology. He points to the limits and biases of any 'teleological' approach to the history of art, of styles and movements cut into convenient chunks and based on biography, propsing instead an alternative 'history of things' based simply on those objects that are *desirable* enough to have survived. The same set of basic forms, he says, have always been around, modified according to the vicissitudes of different eras, epochs, and milieus.

Kubler's desirable/unwanted classification ignores the usual distinctions between utilitarian artifacts and works of art, between useful and useless, between originals and replicas, and between tools and expressions.'[29] The surviving, desirable objects literally *shape our time*, he says, in the sense that as they constitute the sensory surface of our world at any given point, and so influence our thinking. This, in turn, continues to influence and shape subsequent artefacts and artworks, and so on – at least, until the next paradigmatic break that sends things off on an entirely other tangent, beyond the refinement of the prevalent stereotypes. He argues, too, that our thinking about man-made objects has been misled by an overwhelming but essentially arbitrary reliance on biological metaphors – the tendency to conceive of art in terms of artists, schools and movements that are 'born', then 'blossom', 'flourish', 'thrive' and 'die'. Metaphors drawn from contemporary physics are far more appropriate, he says: kinetic energy, impulses, generating centres, and relay points.

Our arrow to Kubler's argument here, then, points to the fact that our ad-bond-label doesn't easily fit into the usual categories:

> Let us suppose a gradient between absolute utility and absolute art: the pure extremes are only in our imagination, human products always incorporate both utility and art in varying mixtures, and no object is conceivable without the admixture of both.[30]

Our interview with Christoph ends on the same theme:

SB: And the new value is a certain intensity of feeling?

[26] Greenberg, Modernist Painting', op. cit., p. 301.

[27] Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 5, 1939, pp. 34–49 (my italics).

[28] Greenberg, Modernist Painting', op. cit., p. 5.

[29] Ibid., p. 9.

[30] Ibid., p. 14.

CK: It sounds very kitsch, but it's very true.

SB: 'Intensity of feeling' is quite clear in terms of the publishing and distilling, but less obvious in terms of ownership. It's interesting to consider the idea of 'owning things' as being fundamental to both capitalism and your life on the farm, even though we're generally implying they're opposites. Perhaps it's the difference between the hollowness of gratification and richness of responsibility; you're distilling the good parts of the idea of ownership. That's pushing it a bit, but you understand what I mean.

CK: Yes, again it's to do with taking care of things. I've never really spoken about this with anyone before, but sometimes I need two hours in the evening to just walk around and look at everything. And though I've seen it many times, it's nothing to do with pride, it's simply about watching, looking properly … what happens over here, what happens over there … those plants are dying now, those plants are growing … the tiles have come off the roof here … just checking the status of things. It's almost embarrassing to describe this walk, but that's what happens; it's a strange level.

SB: Any last thoughts before we start on the absinthe?

CK: Maybe I should just say that, in relation to the surface of what you're interested in here – the change from publishing books to publishing alcohol – I have to confess that my involvement has also changed my idea of what design and designing is, and that's also precisely in terms of thinking about it less as a surface, and more towards to the notion of changing material from one form to another. By the end of Revolver, I could maybe understand the idea of designing being an act of transformation, of translation, of transposition, but now I understand it more clearly – more transparently – through observing the tangible changes from plants and fruit to other forms.

## 6.6: PROJECTION OF A POST-INDUSTRIAL FILM

The costs were listed on the following prospectus and the share price calculated according to the logic of a not-for-profit co-operative production. This means that each individual investor will receive a percentage of the total yield of the eventual product directly proportional to the percentage of the overall budget he or she contributed in the first place, a system that eschews any profit margin in favour of a 1:1 equivalence of investment and return.

The 'quantity of the eventual product' is ambiguous at this point only because it's impossible to account for the exact output of any particular batch of whisky due to the 'angel's share' phenomenon – the unpredictable amount of liquid that evaporates or is otherwise lost as the whisky matures in the barrel. That said, it's easy enough to guestimate the maximum loss, and a cursory calculation suggests an approximate minimum of two 750 ml bottles per share.

The Serving Library
P.O. Box 1014
New York, NY 10002
U.S.A.
www.servinglibrary.org

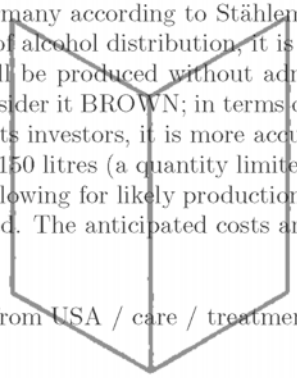
BLACK WHISKY COSTS DISTILLED

The production of BLACK WHISKY is a joint undertaking by Dexter Sinister, publishers (New York, USA) and Stählemühle, distillers (Eigeltingen-Münchhof, Germany). Distillation is due to take place in the summer of 2010, towards the production of a batch-distilled, single Bavarian malt, non-blended whisky, using pure water from the Black Forest, which will mature for 12 years in a used Bourbon barrel imported from the USA, to be bottled and distributed sometime after 2021.

We will operate a simple cooperative economy: anyone wishing to invest a percentage of the production budget will receive exactly the same percentage of the total number of bottles produced. Any person, group, or institution is free to invest a MINIMUM OF 1 PERCENT and a MAXIMUM OF 20 PERCENT of the production budget detailed below. 10 PERCENT of the total investment/output is reserved each for Dexter Sinister and Stählemühle (20 PERCENT total), therefore 80 × 1 PERCENT shares are available. We intend to carve up and collect this total budget in advance of distillation. Interested parties should therefore propose their involvement by the end of Spring 2010, preferably by informal e-mail to: INFO@DEXTERSINISTER.ORG.

Each investment will be guaranteed by a blind-printed share certificate which will serve as a trust bond. The agreed percentage will be written into this contract, to be signed by both parties, and eventually exchanged for the product. Regarding tincture — in terms of tax, as the whisky will be legally produced within Germany according to Stählemühle's "Right to Burn" but will not operate within any regular system of alcohol distribution, it is more accurate to consider it GREY; in terms of color, as the whisky will be produced without admixture of either artificial or natural colorants, it is more accurate to consider it BROWN; in terms of economy, as long as the production of the whisky remains indebted to its investors, it is more accurate to consider it RED.

We intend to produce 150 litres (a quantity limited by Stählemühle's distilling license) to be bottled in 0.7 litre bottles. Allowing for likely production waste, this means 150 litres / 0.7 = approx. 200 bottles will be produced. The anticipated costs are below.



BARREL
Purchase / transport from USA / care / treatment — EURO 3,000

PROCESS
Single malt (Bavarian, smoked malt, ca. 500 kg — EURO 1,000
Milling — EURO 100
Yeasts — EURO 100
Enzymes, acid, other chemicals — EURO 100
Water, ca. 2500 liters + plumbing/transport/storage — EURO 1,000
Energy (water cooling during distilling) — EURO 300
Miscellaneous (cleaning chemicals etc.) — EURO 500

LABOR
Distilling/caretaking (over 12 years) — EURO 6,000

PACKAGING
Bottles (production / caps / shrinks) — EURO 1,000
Labels — EURO 400

TAX
Distilling tax — EURO 1,500

TOTAL = EURO 15,000 (approx. USD 22,200 / GBP 13,500)

THEREFORE, 1 PERCENT share (= 2 × 0.7 liter bottles) costs EURO 150 (USD 220 / GBP 135)
THEREFORE, 1 bottle = EURO 75 (USD 110 / GBP 75), e.g. an investment of 10 PERCENT would cost EURO 1.500; the investor would receive 20 bottles after 12 years.

All information correct as of Fall 2009. THIS PROSPECTUS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST.
Dexter Sinister (www.dextersinister.org / www.servinglibrary.org)
Stählemühle (www.staehlemuehle.de)

Over the next year, the blind proof and this accompanying prospectus circulated in various contexts as and when opportunities arose. Framed versions of the original embossed version were variously exhibited,[31] while the black-on-white PDF version did the rounds as an advert in a number of books, magazines and newspapers.[32] Word of mouth helped too, of course. In the meantime, Christoph was busted for unregistered overproduction and issued a six-month ban, but used the opportunity to rebuild the Stähelmühle distillery from scratch. Production was duly postponed until the Spring of 2011, by which time all the shares had been sold, the run of certificates distributed, and a new state-of-the-art still installed at Stählemühle.

The only outstanding aspect was the barrel. As briefly noted above, through some historic twist of circumstance Scotch whisky came to be distilled in used Bourbon barrels, which emanate *exclusively* from the U.S.A. And it turns out that the barrel industry is monopolized by Brown-Forman, the parent company of, among others, Jack Daniels, both of which are based in Kentucky. On realizing this, along with the fact that any other type of barrel (a brand new one, or one previously used to age wine) would compromise quality, we began the extremely protracted, labyrinthine process of trying to secure a single used Bourbon barrel while remaining within our projected (and collected) costs. It soon became apparent that we were unlikely to find a single barrel for sale anywhere outside the monopoly – at least, not one guaranteed to withstand 12 years of use according to industry standards.[33]

The only option was to try and acquire a barrel from Brown-Forman co. by tapping some point in the channel of manufacture. We first tried to do this in Scotland, figuring that we could cut shipping costs to Germany by buying one already imported; only it seemed that all the barrels from Kentucky were imported through a single agent, and here we hit a dead end – either no response or point-blank refusal. And so were forced to approach the master company, only to hit upon the same problem: a policy refusal on private sales, and no interest in exceptions to the rule.

Obviously reluctant to concede what appeared to be our only possible means to bring this project to fruition (i.e. the whisky's beginning), it seemed increasingly necessary to make the trip to Kentucky in order to speak to someone directly, possibly provoking some degree of personal interest that might override company protocol. We duly organized a road trip, stopping off first at a distillery on the Kentucky Whisky Trail, a fairly useless tourist tour, then more promisingly at Brown-Forman's barrel factory in Louisville. We were led along the production line by a rep from their Public Relations department – from a stockpile of raw timber to a room of hand-finished barrels (including a walled-off part of the factory that housed a top-secret process of burning and smoking). Then we were ushered into a meeting room where we asked again the question that hadn't been straightforwardly answered by letter, phone or email, i.e. whether we might be able to order a single barrel and to ship it to Europe. The PR guy said: 'We retail a minimum batch of 220.' I said: 'That's 219 too many.' And that seemed to be that. No exceptions and no alternatives.

But not quite.

[31] For example: *Black Whisky (Blind Proof)*, 2nd Cannons, Los Angeles, October 25 – December 5, 2009; *An Invitation to an Infiltration*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, 21 January – 28 February, 2010; and *Vertically Integrated Manufacturing*, Murray Guy, New York, 9 January – 20 February, 2010. The latter show's press release described it in these terms: 'Black Whisky is a speculative collaboration between Dexter Sinister and Stähmühle, an artisanal schnaps producer in the Black Forest of Germany. Sinister approaches whisky production self-reflexively and transparently, returning to a codified form of production – one which results in a potable product with a measurable standard of quality – to examine possibilities of strict vertical integration (conception, manufacturing, advertising and distribution) amidst changing systems of circulation and exchange.' See: http://murrayguy.com/exhibitions/vertically-integrated-manufacturing-2010.

[32] For example: *Fillip*, no. 10 (2009); *Common Circular 2: Common Room Presents Dexter Sinister Presents Common Room*, (2009); Dexter Sinister, *True Mirror Microfiche Post-Post-Script* (New York: Dexter Sinister, 2010); Dexter Sinister (eds.), *Portable Document Format* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), Jenifer Papararo, ed., *An Invitation to An Infiltration*, exhibition catalogue (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2010).

[33] There are plenty of 'cosmetic' used barrels available, typically sold and used as garden ornaments or waste bins, but they're likely to leak. In the regulated industry each recycled barrel passes through a series of checks and repairs before being sold on.

For some months we'd been trying to contact a curator of a gallery on the ground floor of a recently opened hotel in Kentucky. We'd heard, in fact, that the hotel was set up in order to get planning permission for the gallery that would house the owner's collection of contemporary art. Anticipating an off-chance of interest in what we were up to, we were particularly interested to talk to this curator, especially after we learned the owner had links to the Jack Daniels family. As it turned out, the collector's wife was a third or fourth generation descendent, and currently heir to the company. For some six months the curator hadn't responded, but we did now manage to contact him while still in town – ostensibly in order to book a room at the hotel. Following our disappointment at the barrel plant, and just before leaving back to New York, we met him for a drink and recounted the story.

'You should have got in touch with me.'

'We tried.'

'Well, I'm pretty sure I can get [name of Jack Daniels' heir-husband] to waive the rules for one barrel.'

'…'

'Let me know what you need exactly and I'll call you next week.'

Improbably, this did actually pan out. Six months of haranguing later, a barrel reportedly showed up at the curator's office. Then it was transferred to the hotel's storage facility where it sat for another season while we attempted to arrange the shipping from a distance. Suddenly, sometime over Christmas 2009, the barrel was put on a pallet, Fed-Exed, cleared both U.S. and European customs without question, and showed up at the farm intact around mid-January.



Four months later the whisky was in the barrel, and three miniature samples sent as proof to New York. The one we opened in celebration tasted like nail polish. It was in the backs of our minds when we first conceived of this project, that we might document the entire process in view of making some kind of industrial film (i.e. that very particular breed of educational documentary that tracks some raw material or other along an assembly line through to the final product and its eventual distribution, usually set to music, occasionally with a voiceover). But the idea was only half-formed when we the project got underway, and we anyway worried over the point of pursuing such an obviously anachronistic form. Why make an industrial film in a post-industrial context? In any case, we didn't get it together in time and the idea faded.

In retrospect, though, the information age equivalent of the industrial film's tropes – tracking shots of chains-of-events and flows-of-production; jump-cuts from forest to truck to delivery depot to factory floor to retail outlet; the machines' automated choreography – now consist in the myriad *immaterial* interactions, the endless emails that had to be written in order to get the stuff into the barrel. In which case, a post-industrial film is perhaps best kept in terminal pre-production.

## 6.7: THE LETTER VERSUS THE SPIRIT OF FUTURISM

This chapter now switches track to chart the development of a newspaper project that got underway around the time the whisky was starting to ferment.

Performa is a biannual festival of performance art held in New York since 2005. In 2009, we were invited to consider the possibility of producing a corollary newspaper to accompany that year's events. The biennial was programmed in homage the centenary of Futurism, a hundred years since the improbable publication of F.T. Marinetti's incendiary 'Futurist Manifesto' in mainstream French newspaper *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909. As far as we could gather, Performa's reasons for 'producing a corollary newspaper' didn't seem to extend much beyond merely referencing this historical moment, or perhaps very weakly mimicking it – and even then, copying the container rather than its contents. This didn't seem reason enough.

Whatever the format, Performa did have some vague idea of publishing 'news' about and around the rest of the programme taking place across the city over the festival's three weeks as and when it happened – dedicated announcements, reports, profiles, interviews and reviews. However, mindful of the actual institutional stress that generally accompanies such ambitious high-profile arts events, especially in New York where secondary media coverage often seems to outweigh all other priorities,[34] it was difficult to conceive there'd be adequate time, energy, rigour or fees to foster the sort of writing that would amount to a worthwhile publication (as opposed to a cheap advertorial rag, which was conversely all too easy to imagine). From our point of view, Performa were casting about for some worthwhile material to squeeze into a formal conceit, which seemed to be exactly the wrong way of going about things.

The more we thought about it, the more the Futurist premise seemed to be most ill-considered kind of 'celebration' – a monument to a movement that fundamentally resisted monuments (*Smash the museums!* etc.). Trying hard to avoid being completely cynical, we considered the invitation from a whole other angle: according to *the spirit rather than the letter* of Futurism. What might we conceive to be 'transferable' Futurist qualities that transcend the original context and circumvent the movement's characteristic violence, destruction, provocation, confrontation, glorification of the machine, war, and machismo generally; and that aim instead to capture time, space, speed, scale – all those dynamic, haptic aspects of the moment – in view of putting them to newly pertinent work … ?

This line of thinking chimed with Performa's suggestion in the sense that a newspaper is obviously a relatively immediate format. It seemed significant, too, that at this particular moment in 2009, the entire news industry was in the throes of serious upheaval, painfully working through a paradigm shift. The impact of the inevitable switch from material to digital formats on publishing's production and distribution mechanisms was massive. Less and less economically viable, newspapers were fast becoming Old Media.

The technological shift also raised attendant questions about the veracity of contemporary journalism, and the long-established authority of the old models was challenged by major independent online news sites; local, niche, and personal blogs; crowd reporting and other forms of audience participation, and so on. Major established newspapers and their local equivalents were either closing down for good or seriously downsizing and recalibrating, with the surviving ones experimenting vigorously with digital replacements, counterparts or supplements; but as the economic viability of these new formats was yet to be standardized or regulated, the process was highly tenuous and expensive. 2009 seemed to be the locus of this crisis, which was of course reflexively reported *through* those very channels *in* crisis. 'The news' was in the news, and being debated at an especially high pitch.

And so we resolved to tap the moment by making some form of newspaper, too. In a sense, we would only be adding to all the debate already circulating – but with a few marked differences. First, we could reasonably assume we'd be working with our usual circle of contributors, none of whom are

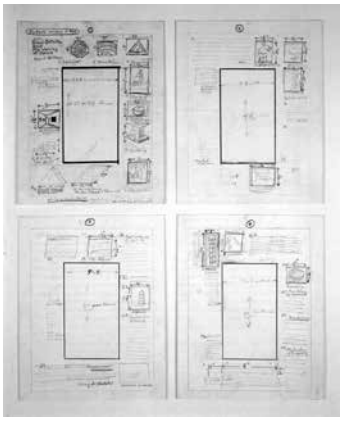
[34] See chapter 4.

professional journalists (or avowedly non-professional journalists), or otherwise directly involved in the industry. As such, they'd be writing a step removed, i.e. without any immediate or obvious vested interest or particular leaning towards one or other side of the various debates at play (e.g. material vs. digital, professional vs. amateur, old hierarchy v.s new 'democracy'. Our take would be essentially *disinterested*. Moreover, we'd be releasing that writing outside any clearly established editorial rubric, or at least one obscure enough to resist 'contaminating' its material: we'd be coming at the subject from a typically obtuse art angle, a relative anonymity that might be put to good use. Finally, it seemed an attractively ridiculous proposition to *start* a newspaper under such conditions, which already implied a certain approach if not yet a clear direction. Our hope was to grasp something of the moment by way of projecting its future, approaching an on-topic from an off-angle. This seemed a far more pertinent use of 'futurist' spirit.

And so we began assembling the conditions to allow these intentions to play out, starting with a dumb title, *The First/Last Newspaper*. 'Last' was meant in that obvious sense that physical newspapers were clearly becoming quickly obsolete. 'First' was foremost a material reference: we would adopt the format of the earliest newspapers – large-format, single-leaf 'broadsheets' dating from early 17th century Europe (and around a century later in the U.S.A.). Although such a full-circle return to the medium's point of origin was an attractive enough allusion, our reasoning wasn't sentimental. The broadsheet format was well suited to our circumstances: easy to conceive, cheap to make, simple to produce, and convenient to disseminate. Moreover, broadsheets were initially hung to be read in public in advance of individual copies being disseminated for private reading, a tradition perhaps worth reviving in this first/last context.

Having settled on a name and format, we began casting about for an equally productive approach to its layout (i.e. the graphic articulation of text and image according to the constraints of the page) – one that would similarly embody its mode of production or other underlying ideas. A key influence here was Robert Smithson's article 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space' (1966), originally published over four pages in *Arts Magazine*.[35] This characteristically compressed, elliptical piece of work debunks what Smithson considers the 'pathetic fallacy' of biological metaphors habitually attached to then-contemporary Abstract Expressionism (e.g. the work of such as Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock). He posits counter-examples of artists preoccupied with solidifying 'ideas of time' (e.g. the void of Ad Reinhardt's abstract paintings; sculptures by Ruth Vollmer, Eva Hesse, Lucas Samaras and Donald Judd).

Drawing on diverse historical examples, including Kubler's *The Shape of Time*, which was published four years earlier, Smithson's commentary runs through a central field marked off by a thick frame from a large 'ultramundane' margin (equivalent in area to the 'body' text itself) populated by a collection of images (and texts) that zoom in and out between micro and macro, between 'expanded' and 'contracted' views of the universe. He plotted the basic idea in this sketch:



[35] Robert Smithson, 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space' [1966] in: Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

fdLike many of the works in its margins, the layout conveys its subject matter – a Russian doll of a page that functions as a kind of iconic mnemonic.

This idea of 'specific form' in terms of page layout was developed in the abstract by one of Smithson's margin examples, Dan Graham, in his magazine piece 'SCHEMA for a set of pages whose component variants are to be published in various places' (1966). The schema comprises a list of verbal and typographic 'placeholders', such as '(number of) adjectives', '(perimeter of) page' to '(number of) words italicized':

> In each published instance, it is set in its final form (so it defines itself) by the editor of the particular publication where it is to appear, the exact data used to correspond in each specific instance to the specific fact(s) of the published final appearance. The work defines itself in place only as information with simply the external support of the facts of its external appearance or presence in print in place of the object.[36]

Graham's piece suggests why highlighting those *generic* aspects of a format's form might usefully inform an artful approach to a newspaper: it lays the process bare in order to consider the subject from scratch. For the same reason, Hollis Frampton once introduced a talk on the history of film as 'A Partial Disassembling of an Invention Without a Future: Helter-Skelter and Random Notes in Which the Pulleys and Cogwheels Are Lying Around at Random All Over the Workbench.'[37]

At different points in time but for related reasons, Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan both claimed the newspaper to be a new archetype of visual-verbal communication. In 1936, Benjamin asserted that 'technically speaking' the newspaper represents the most important literary position of the time.[38] Writing from an explicitly Marxist standpoint, the principle of communal ownership was paramount – in art as in industry. Benjamin saw the modern newspaper as usefully loosening up traditional antinomies such as 'science and *belles letters*' and 'culture and politics'. It was 'a theatre of literary confusion' whose content is 'subject matter' and its 'form of organization' fundamentally imposed by 'the readers' impatience'.[39] Benjamin duly deemed the newspaper a properly *common* property that bridged the distance between author and public. Via the new possibility of letters to the editor and so forth, citizens were now also potential writers, and literature 'gains in width what it loses in depth'. In the shift from being a narrowly bourgeois medium to becoming a broadly egalitarian one, the newspaper served as a revolutionary testament as well as a revolutionary tool.

Benjamin thus urged the progressive writer to actively involve himself in his or her vocation's root-level machinations rather than passively work at its tail end. Even the most left-wing commentator perpetuates the status quo, he says, as long as he or she fails to directly address their work's underlying conditions, such as the formats dictated by the technology's default settings, or the vested interests of the institutions they serve. Instead of merely reporting on them at a remove, Benjamin's requires his self-aware and socially committed writer to transform them from within – specifically, 'in the direction of socialism'.[40] Nowadays, outside the Marxist context, Benjamin's model author might be more generally thought of as someone who constantly measures the effect of his work against the degree to which it advances positive social change – and works with vanguard technologies in view of maximizing that effect.

[36] Which duly resulted in a number of published versions of schema and outcome, such as: Dan Graham, 'Poem, March 1966', *Aspen*, 5/6, Fall/Winter 1967–68.

[37] Hollis Frampton, 'The Invention Without a Future', *October*, no. 109, Summer 2004.

[38] Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', op. cit.

[39] All ibid.

[40] See also §1.4.

Writing in 1967,[41] McLuhan focused more fully on the graphic analogue of this 'literary confusion' in terms of the 'problem of orchestration' of this 'simultaneity of focus'; the 'jazzy, ragtime discontinuity', 'front page cubism' and 'symbolist landscape';[42] and he draws clear links between its multivalent character and equivalent cases in other fields:

> It is on its technical and mechanical side that the front page is linked to the techniques of modern science and art. Discontinuity is in different ways a basic concept both of quantum and relativity physics. It is the way in which a Toynbee looks at civilizations, or a Margaret Mead at human cultures, Notoriously, it is the visual technique of a Picasso, the literary technique of James Joyce.[43]

At this point we paused to propose our recalibrated idea of what a properly 'futurist' newspaper might look like in 2009. In order to perform it to Performa rather than merely explain it, we produced a series of poster-size 'pages' that assembled the basic idea together with a bunch of immediate references according to the readymade template of Smithson's 'Quasi-Infinities'; the idea being to give a sense of how we might approach the whole thing rather than project an explicit outcome. The following four pages were blown up to broadsheet format and installed along one of the walls in Perfoma's offices one Monday morning.

[41] Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* [1951] (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1967).

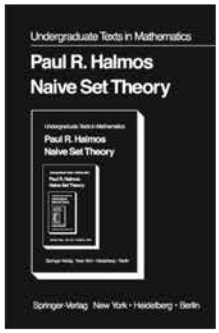
[42] All ibid.

[43] Ibid., p. 3.

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# A CURRENT PROPOSAL

1.

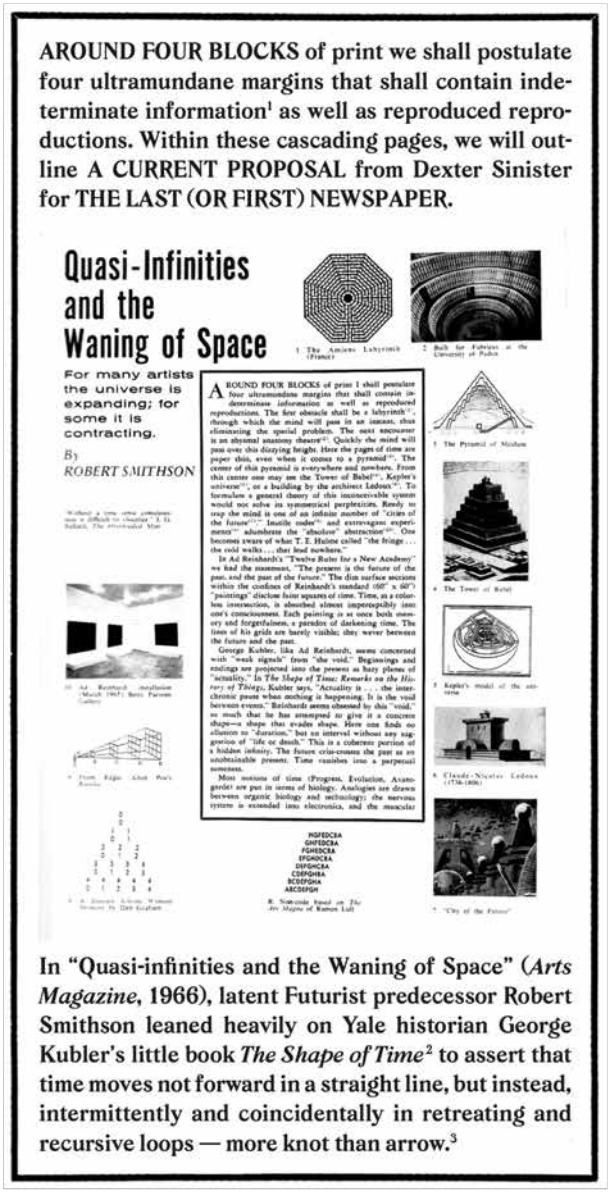



Altered cover of Paul R. Halmos, *Naive Set Theory*, 1960

"From kindergarten, most of us remember the Broken Telephone Game. One person whispers a word or a phrase into the ear of the person next to him. That person, in turn, repeats it quietly to the next. And so on until, at the end of a long line of people, the language finds itself transformed. Dispersed information is information spread too thin. In efforts to stop information, younger artists have made their work to operate inside of a Broken Telephone Game, generating a slippage of meaning and welcoming processes of mistranslation." Anthony Huberman, 'Naïve Set Theory,' *Dot Dot Dot 15*, 2007




"At Gavin Brown's Enterprise, a gallery in Greenwich Village in New York, I've admired for a while the painted statement that wraps round the façade of the corner building. It says 'the whole world + the work = the whole world. It is *Work Number 300* by Martin Creed and implies a worldview in the form of a simple mathematical equation that seems to embed the logic of Naïve Set Theory. Underlying this simple sentence is again simple Set Theory. The set of the Whole World contains everything in the whole world and the Work is a thing in the Whole World, so then the Whole World must necessarily completely contain the Work. Adding the Work back to the Whole World leaves you again with only the Whole World. This idea of art-making echoes the ideas of James, Gödel and Halmos. The Work is produced only by practice and is only added to the Whole World which, although it contains every thing in the whole world, is also, by definition, incomplete. Very lovely." David Reinfurt, 'Naive Set Theory,' *Dot Dot Dot 17*, 2008



AROUND FOUR BLOCKS of print we shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information[1] as well as reproduced reproductions. Within these cascading pages, we will outline A CURRENT PROPOSAL from Dexter Sinister for THE LAST (OR FIRST) NEWSPAPER.

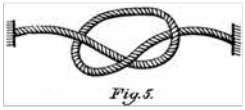
## Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space

For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting.

By ROBERT SMITHSON

In "Quasi-infinities and the Waning of Space" (*Arts Magazine*, 1966), latent Futurist predecessor Robert Smithson leaned heavily on Yale historian George Kubler's little book *The Shape of Time*[2] to assert that time moves not forward in a straight line, but instead, intermittently and coincidentally in retreating and recursive loops — more knot than arrow.[3]

3.



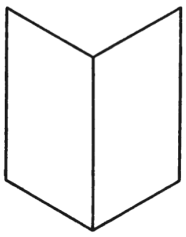

"The exciting thing about all this is that as it is new it is old and as it is old it is new, but now we have come to be in our way which is an entirely different way." Gertrude Stein, *Narration: Four Lectures*, 1969

"So that finally, there is one last thing we should stop doing. We should stop calling ourselves new. We are not. They were new. We are old, and we have not necessarily aged as well as we should. To cite Eliot again: he reports himself as answering someone who objected to, I suppose, Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer on the grounds that we know more than they did by replying, "yes, we do, and they are precisely what we know." Hollis Frampton, 'Invention without a future', lecture from November 17, 1979

"This book has a lot to say about Ancient Greek perspectives and their meaning but there is one perspective it misses. That is their view of time. They saw the future as something that came upon them from behind their backs with the past receding away before their eyes. When you think about it, that's a more accurate metaphor than our present one. Who really CAN face the future? All you can do is project from the past, even when the past shows that such projections are often wrong. And who really can forget the past? What else is there to know?" Robert M. Pirsig, 'Afterword,' in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 1974.

"As far as I am concerned, there are no such things as forms that are more or less up to date. All forms, materials, ideas, and means are available and to be used. Walking by means of stepping to one side takes us out of the system that goes straight ahead. There is no goal before us with laurels for the first to arrive and ashes for the last." Michaelangelo Pistoletto, 'Famous Last Words,' *Bit* 2, June 1968

2.



Optical illusion

"It's quite the same here as anywhere else, but here it's made quite clear: space is generated by need. Let's say you'd like to take a walk. You simply project in front of you the necessary space which you walk across as and when. The same with time. Just as a spider secretes the thread down which she climbs, so you secrete the time you need to do whatever you need to do, and you proceed along this thread which is visible behind you but usable only in front of you. The key lies in working it out properly…" Rene Daumal, *A Night of Serious Drinking*. 1938

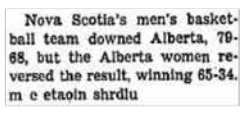
1.


LE FIGARO

3. Ezra Pound, *Make it New*, 1934

"The man who claims to be modern must be proficient in the highest degree, for unless he can atone by creative ability for his break with tradition, he is merely disloyal to the past. It is sheer juggling to look upon a denial of the past as the same thing as consciousness of the present. Today stands between yesterday and tomorrow, and forms a link between past and future; it has no other meaning. The present represents a process of transition, and that man may account himself modern who is conscious of it in this sense.

Every good quality has its bad side, and nothing that is good can come into this world without directly producing a corresponding evil. This is a painful fact. Now there is the danger that consciousness of the present may lead to an elation based upon illusion: the illusion, namely, that we are the culmination of the history of mankind, the fulfulment and the end-product of countless centuries. If we grant this, we should understand that it is no more than the proud acknowledgement of our destitution: we are also the disappointment of the hopes and expectations of the ages. The modern man is aware of this. He has seen how beneficient are science, technology and organisation, but also how catastrophic they can be." Carl Gustav Jung, 'The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man,' *Collected Works*, 1953


Nova Scotia's men's basketball team downed Alberta, 79-68, but the Alberta women reversed the result, winning 65-34. m c etaoin shrdlu

ETAOIN SHRDLU is the approximate order of frequency of the twelve most commonly used letters in the English language and best known as a nonsense phrase that sometimes appeared in the days of "hot type" print publishing. Linotype operators who had made a typing error couldn't easily go back to delete it, and had to finish the line before they could eject the slug and re-key a new one. Since slug would be discarded, the quickest way to finish the line was to run a finger down the keys, creating this nonsense phrase. Occasionally and accidentally the words appeared in a final edition.

"The rest of time emerges only in signals relayed to us at this instant by innumerable stages and by unexpected bearers … The nature of a signal is that its message is neither here nor now, but there and then." George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 1964

Detroit Free Press

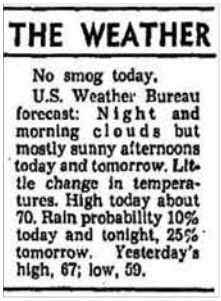
A restoration that evolved into a redesign.

AND SO WE DEPART from February 20, 1909—F.T. Marinetti's manifesto appeared today on the front of *Le Figaro*.[1] *We had been awake all night my friends and I, under the mosque-lamps whose filligree copper bowls were constellated like our very souls* … Then this morning's *New York Times* p. A14 under "Detroit Journal", the headline reads: "In a Grand Experiment, 2 Daily Newspapers Now Not So Daily."[2]

It's a big news day in Detroit: Michigan State made the Final Four basketball playoffs to be held in the Motor City next weekend, and yet more bad news for the city's auto-industry as the new administration demands GM surrender Chrysler's independence to a partnership with Italy's Fiat. However, these stories merely frame the real subject of the article: how the local interest in both events has brought the current crisis in the newspaper industry into sharp relief.

All of this news would have landed on hundred of thousands of Motor City doorstops on Monday morning, in the form of *The Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News*. Would have, that is, except that Monday—of all days—was the long-planned first day of the newspapers' new strategy for surviving the economic crisis by ending home delivery on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. Instead, on those days, they are directing readers to their Web sites and offering a truncated print version at stores, newsstands and street boxes. "This morning I felt like something was missing," said Nancy Nester … "There was this feeling of emptiness."

These three column inches offer a pretty concise distillation of the economic issues directing large-scale newspaper publishing now—it is a perfect time to hollow out the old form, and MAKE IT NEW. [3]


THE WEATHER

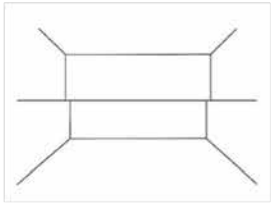
No smog today. U.S. Weather Bureau forecast: Night and morning clouds but mostly sunny afternoons today and tomorrow. Little change in temperatures. High today about 70. Rain probability 10% today and tonight, 25% tomorrow. Yesterday's high, 67; low, 59.

2.


National

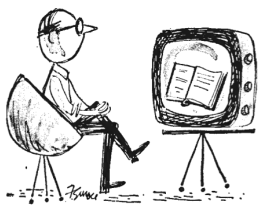
*The New York Times*, National section, Tuesday 31 March, 2009

"It is up to the reader-viewer to decide how to, so to speak, circle the square." Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Movement: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rapture*, 1986



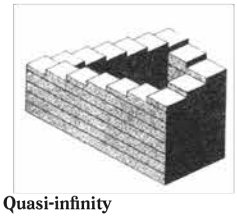
"New work always involves objections to the old, but these objections are really relevant only to the new. They are part of it. If the earlier work is first-rate it is complete. New inconsistencies and limitations aren't retroactive; they concern only work that is being developed … It's not like a movement; anyway, movements no longer work; also, linear history has unraveled somewhat." Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects,' 1965; and *Untitled*, Etching, 1974

"In other words—and this amounts to an aesthetic system—the only meaningful way in whcih art can speak of man and his world is by organizing forms in a particular way and not by making pronouncements with them. Form must be a vehicle for thought: it must be a way of thinking." Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, 1962






Various recent standard newspaper formats, culminating with the "Broadsheet"-format *Guardian* (since reduced to the "Berliner").



1. Quasi-infinity

"Art histories may be measured in time by books (years), by magazines (months), by newspapers (weeks and days), by radio and TV (days and hours). And the gallery proper—*instants!*" Robert Smithson, 'Quasi-infinities and the Waning of Space,' *Arts Magazine*, 1966

OUR INTENT IS DIRECT. This November 2009 as part of the visual art performance biennial, we wish to produce THE (FIRST) (LAST) NEWSPAPER, strictly in the continuous present[1] on a daily basis for three weeks. Half publishing, half performance, our newspaper won't present only the NEWs, but will borrow promiscuously from the past, present and future looping back both to where newspapers started and to where they will go.

PICTURE THIS AS A "BROADSHEET"[2] —precursor of the modern newspaper—set up to report past and future events *as they happen*; designed to be looked at as much as read, in private and in public, engaging both a general and a local interest. In other words, this is a newspaper that self-consciously PERFORMS its specific cultural context.

Although news-on-paper existed both before and after the invention of moveable type in the mid-15th century, the broadsheet format established a newspaper's key technical and typographic conventions which (just about) remain today. The broadsheet is still the largest standard newspaper format, characterized by long vertical pages. The term is derived from popular prints, usually single sheets, sold on the streets and containing various types of matter from ballads to political satire. The first broadsheet was also the first Dutch newspaper, *Courante uyt Italien, Duytslandt, &c.* published in 1618, Amsterdam. Prior to this, news periodicals had been pamphlets in quarto-size. Broadsheets developed further in the New World after a British tax of 1712, levied duties on newspapers based on the number of pages.

Crucially, the broadsheet's large format was designed at dual purpose—to be posted in PUBLIC for communal reading and to be taken away to be read in PRIVATE. This tension between the essential publicity of a newspaper and its dense contents remains.



2. *Courante uyt Italien, Duytslandt, &c.*, June 1618. The *Courante* was a single folio sheet, meaning a full sheet folded once to form 4 pages and then cut open at the fold. The first issues were printed on just one side of the sheet, initially without a serial number, date, or publisher's imprint—features now considered essential to newspapers, and which were to follow in subsequent years. The main text runs in two columns, separated with a gutter and a line running in it. There are no empty lines within the body text. The body of the text is printed in Dutch black-letter, except for the numbers. Roman type is used for datelines which also act as headlines for the news items. The text is fully justified and the beginnings of paragraphs are identified with indents approximately the size of the line-height.




*The Rocky Mountain News* (nicknamed the *Rocky*) a daily newspaper published in Denver, Colorado printed its final edition on February 27, 2009. *The Rocky* was the most recent victim of the savage economics of contemporary newspaper publishing. The front page of its final paper recycled the front of its first from April 23, 1859, layered with a solemn goodbye note to its faithful readers.

"To start with, the marginal position should not be mistaken for plain dissent, which in terms of 'stance' or 'posture' often merely inverts what it dissents from, and re-institutionalises; nor does the margin involve secession (or even countenance it). Margin dwellers are balancers, contributory yet withdrawn. Bridges may be built there, or ropes thrown across, though more often, connections are merely pointed to; alternatives weighed and canvassed; sources noted. The line that divides the margin from the text is more than one of address and identity —there is usually an economic barrier —but it is wise to remember that the margin needs its text. Forgetful of this a margin is apt to become a chasm. Recognisably the expertise of a marginal is apt to be narrow but deep; a feature that suits their habitat; but of course when the marginals find the text wholly unacceptable they will tend to develop their own pursuits in some depth, cramped as they are for working space. This always shows, even when rationalised as minimalism. On the other hand a margin's interactive function —even if temporarily suspended— is actually its saving grace, and can out-perform any Debray-like parallel structure, which has no declared relative scale, or means of crossing over. The margin does not hesitate to foray into the text when its offerings otherwise go unheeded, or when food is scarce. There can even be frivolity, and an exchange of artefacts. The Citroen 2CV, for instance, plainly a margin vehicle—it has that narrow look, and the conceptual rectitude—was of course designed




for the text, and is somehwhat uneasily back there in a renewed lease of life. In sum, therefore— and not to stretch this line of thinking too far—the margin may be a place of relegation, or of voluntary exile, but for those whose natural habitat it is (and I speak of my friends), this is one place for active people to be. There are others." Norman Potter, *Models and Constructs: margin notes to a design culture*, 1990



Umberto Boccioni, *The Development of a Bottle in Space*, 1912

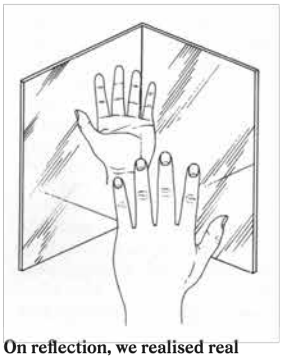


1. Street newspaper, China



(number of) adjectives
(number of) adverbs
(percentage of) area not occupied by type
(percentage of) area occupied by type
(number of) columns
(number of) conjunctions
(depth of) depression of type into page surface
(number of) gerunds
(number of) infinitives
(number of) letters of alphabet
(number of) lines
(number of) mathematical symbols
(number of) nouns
(number of) numbers
(number of) participles
(perimeter of) page
(weight of) paper sheet
(type of) paper stock
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(number of) pronouns
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(number of) words
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(number of) words italized

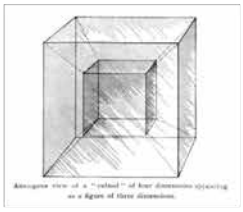
"SCHEMA for a set of pages whose component variants are to be published in various places. In each published instance, it is set in its final form (so it defines itself) by the editor of the particular publication where it is to appear, the exact data used to correspond in each specific instance to the specific fact(s) of the published final appearance. The work defines itself in place only as information with simply the external support of the facts of its external appearance or presence in print in place of the object." Dan Graham, March 1966



On reflection, we realised real news doesn't need a press release.

'Once it's typed it's published', John Chris Jones, *Spanner*, 1979

"No sooner has this text been written than it will be full of holes." Germano Celant, 'Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War,' *Flash Art*, 1967



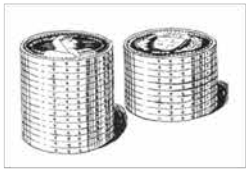
WE PROPOSE TO USE THE *COURANTE* (trans. *current, common, prevalent*) AS A WORKING MODEL, and produce a series of daily broadsheet newspapers during the three weeks of PERFORMA. These would be single-sided, relatively inexpensive web-offset printed flat newsprint sheets assembled from one central location and dispersed from several off-center ones (even other cities[1], i.e. Detroit); displayed both flat, hung in public for collective onsite reading, and folded to be taken away for private reflection.

We will be responsible for all aspects of production and distribution including necessary editorial collaborations. Remaining holes in this current proposal will be plugged in the coming months.

*IMPORTANT* The nature of this project requires the confirmation of a single lump sum budget, negotiated and delivered in advance. The precise outcome—size of the format, quantity of the print-run, extent of its content, and scale of its dispersion is DIRECTLY RELATIVE to the $$$ afforded to the project. You *very visibly* get what you pay for. We generally ask for a working fee of around half the production budget. Bearing all this in mind and given that we intend to work full-time during these three weeks in November as well as concertedly from now leading towards the project while anticipating the likely production costs involved, we suggest a sum of minimum $30,000.

Our broadsheets must be both UNAPOLOGETIC (not excused by their ambiguous status as an art project) and PLAUSIBLE (organized and edited with rigour and conviction); and they must be produced under the twin principles of (a) THE REFUSAL TO TREAT THE PAST AS PAST and (b) whether NEWSPAPERS or FUTURISTS, WE MUST *COMPLEXLY APPLY* RATHER THAN *SIMPLY CELEBRATE* THEIR INHERITANCE.

DS



If asked to judge which of the two piles illustrated is equal in height and width, most people would choose the one on the right—but measurement will show that it is in fact the left-hand pile.

"The present is the future of the past, and the past of the future." Robert Smithson quoting Ad Reinhardt, 'Quasi-infinities and the Waning of Space,' *Arts Magazine*, 1966

"Try writing what you have written in the past tense in the present tense and you will see what I mean. What we have to do is to give back to the past we are writing about its own present tense." Professor Greg Dening, website, 2002

"Hot media—newspapers, novels, and especially such white-hot media as scholarly and stat correlations—will pre-empt all hotness. In their detachment (amidst the general coolness) they will draw even further back, in order to maintain and to become even more themselves in their own right and hotness. The 'footnote' will be the hottest point in these fires. The 'footnote' will be utter detachment and dis-engagement, a radical and liberal barrier behind which to fight or hide. Refuge of those escaping the global village. The last and perhaps only means of those escaping the 'appearance' of appearances. Or the 'state' of the modern state. Or the 'disposition' of others' dispositions. The 'form' of forms. The 'function' of functions. The 'condition' of conditions. The 'temper' of tempers, the 'dilemma' of dilemmas, the 'plight' of plights, the 'aspect' of aspects, the 'pomp' of pomp, the 'mode' of modes the 'tenor' of tenors the 'style' of styles the 'end' of beginnings the 'middle' of middles and the 'beginnings' of the end." Donald Porter, *As if a footnote to the Final Glory*, 1974




"In October 1978, during the midst of a two-week printers' strike which completely halted daily publication of *The New York Times*, an alternative newspaper appeared in street boxes one morning. Created by a consortium of sharp wits including George Plimpton, Christopher Cerf and Nora Ephron, *Not The New York Times* was a spiritual companion to *The Times* produced as a precise doppleganger but with less-than-completely true stories. For example, an interview wth Genghis Khan—"not such a bad fellow"—that orginally appeared in 1241 was reprinted as an author's favorite and followed by a report of the collapse of the Queensboro Bridge under the weight of 10,000 runners in the Rheingold Beer Marathon. "After *The New York Times*, November 14, 2008

Within the body of 'Quasi-Infinities', and quoted in our margins here, Smithson writes that 'Art histories may be measured in time by books (years), by magazines (months), by newspapers (weeks and days), by radio and TV (days and hours). And at the gallery proper – instants!'[44] In our *First/Last Newspaper*, we anticipated some kind of conflation or at least blurring of these 'traditional' media speeds: working according to the weekly-daily schedule of the newspaper, yet in view of creating something that might reasonably resonate months or years afterwards[45] – but instantly, too, by literally producing the thing in public (as if on display in a 'gallery proper').

Oddly enough, Performa had secured the use of a storefront space in a corner of New York's uptown Port Authority Bus Terminal building, opposite the brand new *New York Times* offices. The spot was about as civic as it gets – in the heart of Manhattan, a few blocks from Times Square, embedded in a major public transportation hub. The proposal was accepted, and we began assembling a team of likely contributors to work in this temporary newsroom.

## 6.8: WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT WILL BE

It now seemed necessary to establish some productive limits. We decided to publish six broadsheets during the festival, meaning two per week. They would be double-sided, black-and-white, printed to be distributed on Tuesdays and Fridays on a web press at a local Chinese newspaper printers in Queens, a couple of subway stops away from Port Authority. A print-run of 1,500 would be distributed via various means: first, at all the other Performa events and a number of dedicated information hubs about town; second, by volunteers on the street at a number of locations in Manhattan with high frequency foot traffic; and third, on four specifically designed 'street readers' (triangular wooden stand-alone structures) positioned inside the Port Authority terminal, in the foyer of Condé Nast, at the Cooper Union School of Art, and at its point of production, our makeshift office.

We then assembled a modest bunch of 'correspondents' from our usual constellation that we could trust to respond to a series of very tight deadlines, particularly those with interests relating to the subject (e.g. essayist Steve Rushton, who was then writing on contemporary media and surveillance by way of Michael Foucault, Ant Farm, Jeremy Bentham, and Norbert Wiener; and curator Francis McKee, who was particularly interested in channelling the various denominations of American journalism around the middle of the 20th century). We also enlisted the help of a few photographers and illustrators on ambiguous terms – to be called upon as and when necessary.

Besides a few readymade historical pieces (including the first ever article in the first U.S. newspaper, 'Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick'; a fantastically reflexive piece that amounts to the longest sentence ever published in a newspaper that we retitled 'Record Bites Dust'; and a selection of Swiss artists Fischli and Weiss's 'Order and Cleanliness' diagrams[46]), the general idea was to write and assemble the whole thing in pronounced realtime. That, we reasoned, would be to the 'performative' slant. The remainder of our up-front preparation involved trying to work out how to make the production as expedient as possible in advance. This led to our designing a template for the newspaper, hand in hand with two very particular techniques: TeX typesetting and physical paste-up.

(Incidentally, this preamble is clearly already very specific. It's fine to skip any of these technical paragraphs and pick up the next section.)

TeX is an automated typesetting system developed by Donald Knuth in the late 1970s in order to facilitate professional typographic production. It remains popular today in certain academic fields,

[44] Smithson, op. cit.

[45] For example, when the project as a whole has been shown in exhibitions such as *The Last Newspaper*, The New Museum, October, 2010 – 9 January, 2011; or equally, all the occasions we've referred to it in talks and publications since (including here and now, already five years later).

[46] Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Ordnung und Reinlichkeit*, printed pamphlet, 1981. See: *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #2, 2011.

particularly the mathematics and the science communities. As opposed to the arts industry-standard page-layout softwares that implement a What-You See-Is-What-You-Get or 'WYSIWYG' paradigm, TeX operates according to a What-You-See-Is-What-You-Mean or 'WYSIWYM' one. WYSIWYG-based software such as Adobe InDesign or Microsoft Word immediately display changes in typographic articulation as and when implemented, such that I can perceive a word *italicized* as soon as I alter it. WYSIWYM, by contrast, involves a semantic markup language that separates the instructional input and the graphic result. The system effectively cuts out the need to make on-the-spot design decisions, pouring the raw language into a pre-formatted (and highly efficient) set of parameters.

These two columns show a typical programmed input and processed output: at the word level, TeX has applied the instruction code '/textit{}' to render the indicated text italic, while at the paragraph level the text has been set to a certain predetermined type size and interlinear 'leading', justified across a certain column width with words broken according to fixed hyphenation values.[47]

```
BOSTON -- IT is designed, that the
Countrey shall be furnished once a moneth
(or if any Glut of \textit{Occurrences}
happen, oftener,) with an Account of such
considerable things as have arrived unto
our Notice.
In order hereunto, the Publisher will
take what pains he can to obtain a \
textit{Faithful Relation} of all such
things; and will particularly make
himself beholden to such Persons in \
textit{Boston} whom he Knows to have been
for their own use the diligent Observers
of such matters.
```

BOSTON — IT is designed, that the Countrey shall be furnished once a moneth (or if any Glut of *Occurrences* happen, oftener,) with an Account of such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice.

In order hereunto, the Publisher will take what pains he can to obtain a *Faithful Relation* of all such things; and will particularly make himself beholden to such Persons in *Boston* whom he Knows to have been for their own use the diligent Observers of such matters.

One perceived advantage of our using TeX to produce the newspaper was precisely this reversion to a division of labour ('reversion' because since the advent of desktop publishing WYSIWIG has been the norm in art and design software for obvious reasons; technically speaking, it's just as 'contemporary'). The idea was to foster a more efficient line of production by strongly separating editing procedures (those activities focused on the text: writing, editing, subediting, proofreading) from graphic design ones (those activities focused on the page: the hierarchy, order, and arrangement of articles; the jigsaw of text and images). Such separation would seem to preclude all the usual on-screen futzing, i.e. the tendency to make perpetual changes because it's perpetually possible to do so. In short, adopting TeX would likely force us to assume the sort of discipline and focus necessary to get the thing out twice a week – and so amount to another pragmatic anachronism.

The same goes for the second key aspect. The technique of paste-up is a generation or two old, its heyday roughly the middle of the 20th century, when pages were assembled by arranging material blocks of texts and images, 'pasting them up' (i.e. sticking them down) on a larger sheet, often a gridded template. Completed sheets were then individually photographed in order to make printing plates. Today the process is almost extinct: pages are now configured using digital technology, organized and output either as printed or digital files.[48]

We imagined a three-fold benefit of using paste-up at Port Authority. First, we could work on the micro detailing of words, sentences and paragraphs entirely apart from the arrangement of macro elements like headlines, blocks of text and images. Second, it would allow us to see the page at actual size, which, given the relatively large format (707 x 1000 mm), combined with the fact that we would necessarily be working on relatively small laptop screens, meant we would only ever be able to see either 10% of the page at 100% scale, or 100% of the page at 10% scale – neither of which are particularly practicable. And third, given that a group of people can gather around an in-progress pasted-up 1:1 page, we would be able to make 'actual size' decisions collectively. All these factors fed

[47] More on TeX in §8.1.

[48] More on paste-up in §9.3.

into a base template that we conceived as containing the DNA necessary for anyone in the team to be able to produce a page.

Here’s a much-reduced image of this skeleton page, followed by some notes:

# SINISTER TO ESTABLISH "FIRST/LAST" NEWSPAPER AT PORT AUTHORITY

1 NOVEMBER 2009 — Recently described as "wheat paste," DεXTER SINISTER are set to produce a newspaper twice a week for three weeks this fall under the umbrella of PERFORMA 09, New York's well-regarded bi-annual festival of performance art. Together with a hastily assembled staff of international writers and photographers, the Lower East Side "pamphleteers" will occupy a disused, street-level space in New York's Port Authority bus terminal on the corner of 8th Avenue and 41st Street, directly opposite the new *New York Times* building. According to sources close to Sinister, *The First/Last Newspaper (TF/LN)* will be "as much about the current state of news media as anything else." They will host a public opening of the workspace on TUESDAY 3 NOVEMBER 2009 from 6pm onwards and screen *Farewell, Etaoin Shrdlu*, the 1980 documentary conceived by *Times* Linotype operator Carl Schleninger. Schleninger will offer a small introduction to the film that evening. *TF/LN* will then appear twice a week for the following three weeks, to be distributed in "various formats" yet to be announced. Likewise, further events open to the public will be arranged during their three-week operation. In Sinister's own characteristically melodramatic words: "You don't want to start quantifying things or you're dead." ∎




*Still from* Farewell, etaoin shrdlu, *a 1980 film chronicling the last day of hot metal typesetting at* The New York Times.

IN BRIEF

No sooner has this text been written than it will be full of holes. . . . Art histories may be measured in time by books (years), by magazines (months), by newspapers (weeks and days), by radio and tv (days and hours), by the internet (minutes and seconds). And at the gallery proper — *instants*! . . . As far as I'm concerned, there are no such things as forms that are more or less up to date. All forms, materials, ideas, and means are available and to be used. Real news is bad news, bad news *about* somebody, or bad news *for* somebody. . . . Edgar Poe, a press man and, like Shelley, a science fictioneer, correctly analysed the poetic process. Conditions of newspaper serial production led both him and Dickens to the process of writing backwards. This means simultaneity of all parts of a composition. Simultaneity compels sharp focus on *effect* of thing made. The artist starts with the effect. Simultaneity is form of the press in dealing with earth city. . . . In other words, and this amounts to an aesthetic system, the only meaningful way in which art can speak of man and his world is by organizing forms in a particular way and not by making pronouncements with them. Form must not be a vehicle of thought: it must be a way of thinking. . . . Here I must repeat that the newspaper, from its beginnings, has tended not to the book form, but to the mosaic or participational form. With the speed-up of printing and news-gathering, this mosaic form has been a dominant aspect of human association; for the mosaic form means, not a detached "point of view," but participation in process. . . . No real news followed for 14 years. ∎

– The underlying grid and some ancillary information (measurements, line numbers, edition numbers, dates, contact details of the printers, etc.) are printed in non-reproducing blue, an ink native to paste-up that resists photographic reproduction. It's actually a combination of two grids laid on top of each other. The first is a fairly commonplace newspaper template: 7 vertical columns derived by protracted trial and error relative to the particular styles and sizes of typeface, leading (the space between lines) and gutter width. The second abides the more esoteric 'matroyshka' logic of Smithson's 'Quasi-Infinities' piece, centred on a rectangular block identified by a collection of 'IN BRIEF' fragments. Consecutive 'rings' expand then outward from this focal block, identified by diagonal shading on top of the regular horizontal baselines. The vague idea here was to negotiate both grids at once in view of some productively 'schizophrenic' organization of material – the obvious top-left-to-bottom-right movement of any regular page combined with this other, 'centrifrugal' logic. This might imply a 'lead' article or image positioned at centre to confuse or subvert the regular hierarchy, with sundry knock-on effects.

– The masthead repurposes Shannon Ebner's 2009 'Strike Alphabet', a set of letters built from U.S.-standard cinder blocks.[49] The name of the paper is reduced to an acronym, TF/LN, so as to be visible from a distance. (Other than the forward slash, Shannon's panels are blank on the empty template.) Next, there's a sample 'article' at top left, which doubles as a general announcement and was later left in place as the opening 'editorial' to the first issue. The sample demonstrates the formatting of a standard headline, lead-in, and body text (paragraph level), then its internal articulation (sentence level), concluding with a diminutive black 'halmos' oblong.

– The text sample is accompanied by a similarly generic image and caption. It's a still from the film *Farewell etaoin shrdlu* (1980), a lost documentary about the last day of hot metal Linotype typesetting at *The New York Times* on 1 July, 1978, as well as the morning after when its new electronic computer system gets up and running.[50] The documentary therefore simultaneously mourns and celebrates the news industry's last major technological shift – from a pre-press operation largely still based on mechanization and manual labour (and largely unchanged since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century) to a digitized, automated equivalent.




– In practice, as soon as each front and back had been satisfactorily assembled from laser prints on the

[49] We had latterly worked on a book of Shannon's photographs, and so were familiar with the alphabet's poetic allusions, such as to the modular nature and 'weight' of language. See: Shannon Philayne Ebner, *The Sun As Error* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2010).

[50] David Loeb Weiss, *Farewell etaoin shrdlu* (1980). We screened an original 35mm print of the documentary to launch our paper on 4 November, 2009, just as we sent the first edition to print. The event was attended and introduced by the film's narrator and now retired *New York Times* typesetter, Carl Schlesinger. In a short introduction, Mr Schlesinger lamented that for him the main change between the old and new paradigms – both the analogue-to-digital switch of the 1980s, and today's material-to-immaterial one – was the gradual and insidious elimination of *communal work*, decisions hashed out face-to-face by a group (which was precisely the point of our paste-up). Incidentally, 'etaoin shrdlu' refers to the two non-words formed by running a finger down the left side of the mechanical Linotype keyboard in order to signal an error and run on to the end of a line or 'slug'.

template, we re-made the same arrangement digitally. Once again, the reasoning behind this ostensibly circuitous route[51] was ultimately practical. Our main circulating medium was inevitably a PDF, i.e. the ubiquitous cross-platform Portable Document Format, which is now also the standard format any regular litho press uses to output plates for printing. This meant we could simultaneously go to print and disseminate the same file via digital channels without further adjustment or translation (just a little compression). Just as importantly, though, passing from digital (TeX) through analogue (paste-up) to digital again (PDF) effectively precipitated a series of extra checks: proofing for mistakes is far easier when switching between mediums because perception is constantly aggravated. Moreover, each step of the process had its own specific deadline, which helped keep things moving along.

This set of typographic premises was in place to begin production as soon as the first contributions arrived on 4 November, 2009 – and thereafter each subsequent third or fourth day to yield a total of six editions. Each one was announced by email and simultaneously made available through www.dextersinister.org. They remain archived there in a reverse-chronological list throughout the month of November.

Here is PDF of the first, and a photograph of the print edition of the last:

[51] i.e. from the *What-You-See-Is-What-You-Mean* of TeX, via the *What-You-See-Is-What-Will-Be* of paste-up, to the *What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get* of Adobe InDesign …

# SINISTER TO ESTABLISH "FIRST/LAST" NEWSPAPER AT PORT AUTHORITY

PORT AUTHORITY — Recently described as "wheat paste," DEXTER SINISTER are set to produce a newspaper twice a week for three weeks this fall under the umbrella of PERFORMA 09, New York's well-regarded bi-annual festival of performance art. Together with a hastily assembled staff of international writers and photographers, the Lower East Side "pamphleteers" will occupy a disused, street-level space in New York's Port Authority bus terminal on the corner of 8th Avenue and 41st Street, directly opposite the new *New York Times* building. According to sources close to Sinister, *The First/Last Newspaper (TF/LN)* will be "as much about the current state of news media as anything else." Last night, they hosted a public opening of the workspace on from 6–9pm and screened *Farewell, Etaoin Shrdlu*, a 1989 documentary narrated by Times Linotype operator Carl Schlesinger. Schlesinger offered a brief introduction. *TF/LN* will appear twice a week for the next three weeks, to be distributed in "serious formats" yet to be announced. Likewise, events open to the public will be arranged during their three-week operation. In Sinister's own characteristically melodramatic words: "You don't want to start quantifying things or you'll be dead."




# NEWSPAPER TAX LEVIED: FEW CAN AFFORD DAILY 6 PENCE

NEW YORK CITY — Text takes time. It takes time to read, it takes time to write, and it takes time to reproduce. Throughout the history of text production, people have been searching for ways to distribute the costs of producing text — financial, temporal — more evenly across a system. This search led former goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg to develop and refine his system of moveable type by the 1450s, which eliminated the laborious book-copying process that previously by monastic scribes. And with Gutenberg's system in place, Venetian publisher Aldus Manutius was able to quickly popularize printed books by the late 1400s.

As text becomes easier and cheaper to produce, more copies of it get made. While Gutenberg's Bible was printed in a small edition of 180, Manutius's books were printed by the thousands. More copies need more readers and must readers like their text to be portable. While Gutenberg's heavy Bible was best read at a library table, Manutius's slim editions could be easily slipped in a satchel-bag or vest pocket. You went to Gutenberg's books, but Manutius's books went with you. As increasingly numerous and increasingly portable copies of texts found their way into the world, they found new readers to buy them and they spread literacy with them.

In the next two hundred years, text continued to get swifter, more portable, more widely distributed, giving rise to a new form by the late 1800s and early 1700s: the newspaper. By now firmly established in Europe and North America, the newspaper's growth was spurred by a flowering of global trade. Access to time-sensitive political news and financial information was increasingly important, and publishers strived to invent new technologies to meet demand. By the early 1800s, as a result of the industrial revolution, the *Times of London* boasted a press that could print a daily broadsheet at 1100 pages a minute, with a circulation to match. By 1830, presses could print on both sides, saving paper, and the "penny press" was born, offering a product that cost 1/6 of the competition's price. Once again, more copies, cheaper copies, smaller copies meant better distribution of costs, and, as a result, ever more readers.

As the cost of mechanically reproducing text fell, the cost of circulating printed texts fell. According to historian N.N. Feltes, the fruits of the industrial revolution — "paved roads, fast coaches, canals, and, eventually, railways" — made it easier to deliver printed texts to their intended audiences. Around the same time, firms that were known as "booksellers" shifted away from selling each other's books and instead re-established themselves as something more like the publishers we know today, wholesaling their own books, but not, Feltes points out, "uniformly else's." This concentration of efforts along a single product line did the trick. After all, it does no good to deliver more printed texts to readers if the demand from those readers isn't stimulated at the same time. Some of those same fruits of industry that deepened the cost of circulating text were used to drive up demand: traveling salesmen were dispatched bearing cheap printed prospectuses and catalogs to hawk a publisher's wares to a more geographically dispersed audience. On those same trains and horseways were newspapers, streaming from the center of cities and featuring paid advertisements for books and, increasingly, the free publicity of literary reviews.

Books were cheaper than ever to print, and they were cheaper, faster, and easier to distribute. Readers were increasingly aware of new books on the market, and, because of the new industrial age, they were increasingly able to find leisure time to read them, all of which set the stage for a flourishing of the Victorian appreciation and consumption of literature. Costs fell, distribution climbed, demand grew, but one variable was not improving. It still took authors a long time to produce a text, and, even given their best efforts, there was no guarantee to publishers that an author's work would ignite the passions of an ever-widening public.

Again, it was the newspapers to the rescue — or, rather, the technology developed for the newspaper industry. When a greedy and disapproving British government levied a tax on the newspaper industry starting in 1712, it grew over the next century to 6 pence. Printers began producing pamphlets instead. Through a loophole in the tax law, pamphlets, which were larger than newspapers, weren't taxed and were only marginally more expensive than newspapers to print. While few people could afford the daily cost of 6 pence for a 1- or 2-page newspaper, the occasional cost of a 12-pence (1-shilling) pamphlet of 48 pages seemed justified. Printers narrowly gravitated toward pamphlets and began filling the additional space required with more advertising, fiction, and other miscellaneous content.

Some printers realized that this new content was more popular than their news coverage and began recruiting proven authors to publish exclusively in the pamphlet format. Generally these small booklets were called "numbers" or "serials," but more specifically they evolved into a range of forms including the part-issue, the three-volume, the bi-monthly, and the magazine-serial. Effectively, the serial unbound the singular book, reformulating it into a series of installments. In doing so, it instantly appealed to pedlafters and booksellers by lowering risk. If an author's work did not appeal to the public, at least pedlafters had not put all their eggs in one basket. But the serial also increased demand: not only were serials more reasonably-priced than newspapers, but they were far less expensive than books. The serial was a book on an installment plan. They were wildly collectable — and more portable, too. Most of all, the serial kept a writer in the public eye for months, even years, at a time, as a story's suspense built chapter by chapter. Now, the time it took an author to compose a text was not a liability, but an asset.

Charles Dickens was an author who'd proven himself in the newspaper trade. Starting in 1833 with his first story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," his short essays, or "sketches" of everyday life, had proven popular with the general public. Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, debuted as a part-issue in 1836, around the same time the House of Commons voted to reduce its tax on newspapers to just 1p. With this final regulatory barrier minimized, all the elements needed for a vigorous mass media were in place: it was time for a runaway hit.

Dickens delivered. The first part-issue of *The Pickwick Papers* was a modest edition of 1000, but, after the introduction in Chapter 10 of Sam Weller, Mr. Pickwick's servant, demand exploded. Working-class Londoners couldn't get enough of Sam's Cockney wit and wisdom. By the end of the serial, Dickens's circulation had expanded 40-fold. The author was a bona fide literary star, and the Victorian appetite for "novels in numbers" was raging. (BG)

http://mcsmas-livejournal.com/496511.html

Review

# MUSEUM PIECE

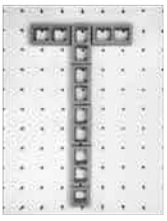
*Farewell etaoin shrdlu*, by David Loeb Weiss. The Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, 1986. 16mm color film. 29 minutes.

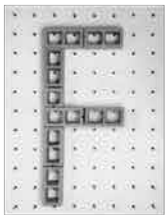
July 1, 1978, may have been a bit-born newsday at *The New York Times* — fighting in Lebanon, a Manhattan explosion, plans for the upcoming Fourth of July — but in the paper's composing room, things were far from routine. On that summer Saturday evening, the next day's early editions of the *Times* were being printed for the last time from hot type cast from molten lead; before the night was through, the changeover to cold type set by electronic computer was final and complete. David Loeb Weiss, a member of the New York Typographical Union and a former proofreader at the *Times* had the foresight to record that historic transition on film, and to ask Carl Schlesinger, a typesetter and an authority on the printing trades who retained *Times* printers in the operation of the new equipment, to narrate the story. This sensitive, unsentimental document is the result.

With the clock on the wall sweeping all too quickly through the fifty-six minutes to the first edition's 9pm deadline, the camera observes the sixty old reliable Linotypes on their final job, revealing in loving detail how molds of letters are cast from 5.30-degree lead to form a solid slug of type: how the lines are spaced and spread into columns of full-page newspaper forms on steel tablets, or "printers' stones"; how engravings, rule, and headlines are made by hand; how page plates or stereotypes, are placed on nine identical presses that reverse the lead image and print right-reading words on the newspaper page; how corrections for the next edition are fixed on the "stones"; and, not least, how typesetting errors are signaled to the proofreader by striking the first twelve keys of the Linotype keyboard, "etaoin shrdlu" — a convention that gives the documentary its title of final farewell.

The process began with Gutenberg, the narrator reminds us — indeed, the machines at work, soon to be auctioned and cannibalized for parts, are of a kind that has for the past hundred years remained virtually unchanged — and on this night, when the Linotype operator discards the last lead line at the end of the last story and gives his old machine a final pat, when he turns out the light and closes the door on the suddenly silent room, an era come to a close. All of the knowledge acquired by the operator in a lifetime of work is now locked in a computer.

But the film is more than an appreciation of the mechanical past, it is also a celebration of the electronic future. Briskly, the camera moves on to the next edition, being put together in lab-like, noise-free, temperature-controlled quarters, where seasoned printers (who have been retrained) orchestrate batons and magnetic tapes, magically transferring paste-ups to flexible plastic plates or high-speed presses via electronic impulses in a laser beam. If the process seems cold in more ways than one, perhaps it is because the more memorable scenes of personal connection — the page editor and layout man with heads together, coaxing the type into the form; the shop's many deaf printers speaking to one another in sign language; the pride of the operators and "makeups" in meeting the deadline one last time — have come before. Certainly, the leap in production is hot enough: 1,200 lines of type a minute, as more than seventy times the speed of the process it replaced.

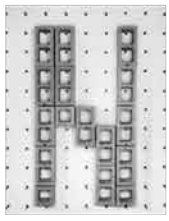






THE FIRST/LAST NEWSPAPER

PORT AUTHORITY, 641 8th Avenue, New York City, NY 10036. 4 NOVEMBER 2009



DEXTER SINISTER




*Still from* Farewell, etaoin shrdlu, *a 1986 film chronicling the last day of hot metal typesetting at* The New York Times.

Even now, though, in its state of technical obsolescence, the genius of the Linotype concept is no less astonishing than that of its automated successor. And to witness the end of one revolution and the beginning of the next is to be struck anew by the awesome reach of human ingenuityness in our urge to communicate. (GC)

*This article first appeared in the Columbia Journalism Review, July/August, 1985.*

Something funny I have noticed, perhaps you have noticed it, too. You know what futurists and online-ists and cut-out-the-middle-man-ists and Davos-ists and deconstructionists of every stripe want for themselves? They want exactly what they tell you no longer need, you pathetic, overweight, disembodied Kindle reader. They want white linen tablecloths on trestle tables in the middle of vineyards on soft blowy afternoons. (You can click your bottle of wine online. Cheapo.) They want to go shopping on Saturday afternoons on the Avenue Victor Hugo; they want the pages of their *New York Times* all kind of greasy from croissant crumbs and butter at a café table in Aspen; they want to see their names in hard copy in the "New Establishment" issue of *Vanity Fair*; they want a nineteenth-century bookshop; they want to see the plays in London, they want to float down the Nile in a felucca; they want five-star bricks and mortar and no NET INTERNET SIGN and views of the park. And in order to reserve these things for themselves they will plug up your eyes and your ears and your mouth, and if they can figure out a way to pump episodes of *The Simpsons* through the darkening corridors of your brain as you expire (ADD TO SHOPPING CART), they will do it.

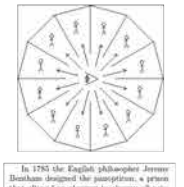
From "Final Edition" by Richard Rodriguez, *Harper's magazine*, November 2009

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*How Media Matters Reality #1*

# PICTURE AN IMAGE OF A PHOTOGRAPH

TIVOLI, NY — Picture a man caught in a dispute between drug gangs in Mexico. This image appeared in *Time* magazine, August 28, 2008. He is lying dead in the street, surrounded by a group of onlookers. Bystanders are taking photos of the body with video, digital, phone-cameras. The number of people in the picture taking a photo of the body almost outnumbers those who are not. To understand the economy of this image requires knowing that a piece of information (a photograph) is a unit of exchange in which our attention, and the attention of others, is accorded value. We don't know the fate of these pictures but some likely have been posted on the Internet to become tokens of exchange on blogs, on-line communities and chat lines. We are all involved in an information economy each time we log on to MySpace, send an e-mail of wherever the circulation of information heightens our visibility. The image-economy is founded on our activity as self-performing subjects, feeding back and exchanging information in order to improve our stake within this media feedback loop — "the social media."



In 1785 the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham designed the panopticon, a prison that allowed an observer to observe all prisoners without the prisoners being able to tell whether they are being watched. Although many were built as prisons Bentham envisioned many other uses for the panopticon, as French Philosopher Michel Foucault suggests. "[Bentham] thought that the panopticon apparatus could be used to construct metaphysical experiments on children. Imagine taking foundlings, right from birth and putting them in a panoptic system, and before they have begun to talk or be aware of anything . . . different things could be taught to different children in different cells; we could teach, no matter what to no matter which child, and we would see the result. In this way we could teach children in completely different systems, poverty or feral isolation to be formed or re-formed as an economically valuable unit, can also join the ranks of experimental subjects in the social realm. Linnaeus introduced the term *Homo Ferus* in his encyclopaedic work *Systema Naturae* in 1758. Taking his cue from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he observed that children raised by animals take on the social characteristics of their foster parents (wolves, bears, sheep etc.). If a child raised in the society of animals assumes the attributes of that society, children raised in different human societies will assume the attributes of those humans. It was in the enlightenment that the notion that an individual could be radically fashioned reached the level of the social experiment in which study of a particular case, removed from its defining context, can provide insights into the operations of the general.

The battleground for this concept was, in case anyone has forgotten, the body of Kaspar Hauser (1828) who until the age of sixteen had been chained to the wall of a windowless cellar near Nuremberg. Following Hauser's discovery, this child untouched by any civilizing influences of society, was taken into the patronage of the kindly rationalist Feuerbach and subjected to an enlightened education, and was later passed on to the aristocrat Earl Stanhope, who displayed him as a remarkable instance of the civilized man, the blank slate of Hauser, it would seem, could be inscribed with the most genteel script.

The emphasis on the importance of learning runs from Bentham's panopticon, through the behaviorism of John Brandus Watson who proclaimed to the *Psychological Review* in 1917, "The time has come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness . . . . Its role task is the prediction and control of behavior; and introspection can form no part of its method." Prediction and control now become dominant figures in the social studio, the emphasis centered on the performance of the organism maximized through *learning*.

But Bentham's proposed experiment remains unable the modern social psychology experiment in another key respect: it involves the containment of its subjects within controlled conditions (the rats on cases of the experiment) a characteristic which was transferred effortlessly to the famous experiments of Stanley Milgram (in his infamous Obedience to Authority experiment) and Philip Zimbardo (with the Stanford Prison experiment) and into still these installities provided the structure, and were transferred wholesale, along with the teams of psychologist advisers, to the industry of the behavioral psychology experiment, the reality TV show.

Bentham's notion of the panopticon as a prototype-behavioral laboratory brings together a number of ideas which were coexisting the environment, ideas that would become axiomatic in the 20th century's positivist, scientific understanding of itself — that social reality (and reality per-se) is constructed, that society creates (forms and informs) the subject, that the reformed subject could increase efficiency and utility within society (and thereby create greater good for the greatest number on the one hand and giving maximum economic performance on the other) and that the subject has no innate characteristics.

Bentham also provides the prototype for a cybernetic view of society. The education of Bentham's hypothetical children, in which radically *different* systems could be taught, resembles a program in two respects: in common parlance as an education program, but also, as a program of computation in which the children receive information and exchange information with other programmed subjects. Bentham's children can be understood as information machines operating within an information network — the shared knowledge they produce and reproduce depends on the data put into the machine — (the mess is made of cheese, $2 \times 2 = 5$). In line with cybernetic thinking Bentham's social studio is an information ecology. It is the feedback between the individual parts of the system within the social studio that maintain the system.

The term *cybernetics* (the study of feedback systems) was coined by Norbert Wiener, author of *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine* (1948). Wiener, along with Julian Bigalow and Vannevar Bush, of the Radiation Lab, or Rad Lab, at MIT (a facility which provided the model for MIT's famous Media Lab). Just prior to The United States' entry into World War II Wiener worked on the development of the "anti-aircraft predictor" from which he developed a notion that feedback systems are the organizing system for the universe itself. From 1946, and with a staff of over 3000 researchers from across a number of disciplines, the Rad Lab developed a number of military projects, including (SAGE) Semi-Automated Ground Environment, an anti-aircraft system, and the Atlas and Polaris missile systems. What is remarkable about the Rad Lab, particularly in relation to our subject, the social studio, is the manner in which this research was conducted. The Rad Lab used a non-hierarchical management style, an epistemological tracking zone in which knowledge across disciplines such as chemistry, mathematics, and physics was exchanged. The Rad Lab was also the model for interdisciplinary research projects in commercial and academic institutions.

This notion of a non-hierarchical research environment was itself a cybernetic model. As Ted Turner has observed, "Wiener believed that biological, mechanical, and social information systems, along with the emerging digital computers, could be seen as analogy of each other. All controlled themselves by sending and receiving messages and, metaphorically at least, all are simply patterns of ordered information in a world otherwise tending toward entropy and noise." By the early '50s such decentralized, system-oriented forms of thought were being played out as artistic experiments at Black Mountain College in North Carolina by John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and their students.

Experiments which Allan Kaprow, who had studied with Cage at the New School for Social Research, was to christen Happenings in 1958. The happening is a system in which artists, audiences, and environment worked together to produce a work, shifting the emphasis away from the notion of the artist painters to the artistic production of the social studio, and also transforming the work of art into the mediation of the experiment, into the logic of the network.

It was from the same milieu that events like the Trips Festival emerged in the mid-sixties. Here the technologies of electronics and LSD served as tools to expand human potential. Echoing media theorist Marshall McLuhan's idea that such technological innovation represents an extension of human potential, here we see the body itself as part of a media ecology. *Ant Farm's Eventronics*, (1969), always with a dash of irony, used image technology and something called the "alpha computer" within a simulated environment to direct their subjects to an "electronic oasis." This project, stocking the figure and ground of the social psychology laboratory and the hippie commune, might be understood as a staging of the human being as sensory information node, where the technologies of electrification and computation pursue the same ends as the technologies of mind expanding drugs.

Countercultural yellow-pages *The Whole Earth Catalog*, was inspired by the cybernetic theories of Norbert Wiener, and, like the Trips Festival, was initiated by Stewart Brand. The catalog served as a resource with which commune members in the 1960s could build a network (70,000 people in the U.S are estimated to have done so between 1967 and 1970). All over America people renounced the system in order to construct their own experiments in their own social studios, keen to make a new start in re-programmed societies.

It was out of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and the network that grew around the publication that the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, or WELL, emerged. WELL, as early BBS — and one of the first social networking sites, was one of the first instances in which a community was sold to itself as a commodity, exchanging information with itself — a media ecology, a system as servomechanism, self-regulating its behavior through feedback.

It would also seem that "the society of the spectacle" has given way to a society of self-performance, in which surveillance is no less real but is this time non-scopic forms of surveillance (GPS systems, credit card checks, the code of DNA used to mark identity, etc.) and much of the surveillance relies on self-surveillance and self-regulation.

In 2005 the WELL's contemporary equivalent MySpace was sold to News International for $580 million. Murdock was buying a constituency of self-performing subjects in the feedback loop of an online community. Evidence of the blurring with the corporate and the personal abound: Xeni, for instance, is a software program that tracks workers through GPS technology in company phones, (so if you phone in sick and head for the beach, make sure you don't take your mobile with you). A recent survey by the Center for Business Ethics at Bently College (U.S.) found that 8 out of 10 employees observe their employees' electronic behavior, and a recent study by the American Management Association and EPolicy Institute found nearly 76% of employees watch employees surf the web and 36% track content, keystrokes and the time spent at the keyboard, and 26% of employees hire staff to sift through email. A report by Forrester Research and Proofpoint found that 32% of employers fired workers between June 2005 and June 2006 for violation of email policy. Software such as Verified Persona keeps tabs on employees outside the office with ongoing background checks — any legal disputes or run-ins with the law will be registered and flagged.

We live in a matrix of surveillance; the surveillance by employers and the state are part and parcel with the self-surveillance that often goes beyond the statutory invitation to "you the viewer" to "have your say." This edict to confess, to perform has become a foundational part of the structure of the media. from television shows screening handycam footage of hapless viewers bumping into lampposts or falling off ladders are stitched together; amateur videos of natural disasters and terrorist attacks provide the "authentic image" in print and TV news. Everyday Joe's and Jane's confess all, underprivileged makeovers, have their roles plugged, have their homes refurbished, their children reconditioned, their marriages fixed, choose new partners, choose new wallpaper, are fed by celebrity chefs, are starved by personal trainers, run the marathon, make poverty history, bungee-jump wearing a red nose and clown's shoes. In this arena of total information economy we increasingly are media to police ourselves, maintain ourselves, judge ourselves against others, penalize our behavior, measure ourselves. In an era when direct government intervention is despised (I don't need handouts from Big Government) new technologies of self-control grew up to replace them (I don't want to end up like the trailer trash on *Judge Judy*!). As a greater part of our lives is taken up with the work of *watching and the work of being watched*, it seems the feedback loop is tightening. (SD)

*A shorter version of this text first appeared in* Control Magazine *18, 2009. The Situationist Studio is taken from the title of an exhibition by artist Artur Zmijewski at BAK, Utrecht, November 2008.*




# PUBLICK OCCURRENCES BOTH FORREIGN AND DOMESTICK

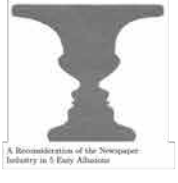
BOSTON — IT is designed, that the Country shall be furnished once a moneth (or if any Glut of Occurrences happen, oftener,) with an Account of such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice.

In order hereunto, the Publisher will take what pains he can to obtain a *Faithful Relation* of all such things; and will particularly make himself beholden to such Persons in *Boston* whom he Knows to have been for their own use the diligent Observers of such matters.

That which is herein proposed, is, First, *That Memorable Occurrents of Divine Providence* may not be neglected or forgotten, as they too often are. Secondly, That People every where may better understand the Circumstances of Publique Affairs, both abroad and at home, which may not only direct their *Thoughts* at all times, but at some times also to assist their *Businesses* and *Negotiations*.

Thirdly, That some thing may be done towards the *Curing*, or at least the *Charming*, of that *Spirit of Lying*, which prevails amongst us wherefore nothing shall be entered, but what we have reason to believe is true, reparing to the best fountains for our Information. And when there appears any *material mistake* in any thing that is collected, it shall be corrected in the next.

Moreover, the Publisher of these *Occurrences* is willing to engage, whenever there are *many False Reports*, malitiously made, and spread among us, if any well-minded person will be at pains to trace any such *false Report* so far as to find out and Convict the *First Raiser of it*, he will in this Paper (unless just Advice be given to the contrary) expose the Name of such person, as *A malicious Raiser of a false Report*. It is supposed that none will dislike this Proposal, but such as intend to be guilty of as villainous a Crime. ■



A Reconsideration of the Newspaper-Industry in 5 Easy Allusions



















*Trying to find a comfortable position (from* Air Mode Visible: A Visual Reader on Bruno Munari, *Verlag Lars Muller, 2001)*

# PRIOR TEMPORAL LOGIC, TIRED

PORT AUTHORITY — "Take the statement 'I am tired,' for example. While its meaning does not change, it is sometimes true and sometimes less so, and a person acts differently depending on the extent of tiredness — going to bed versus going on a hike."

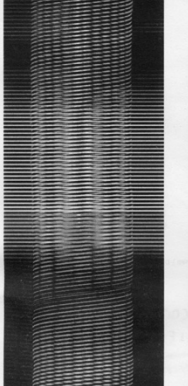
This example of Temporal Logic is borrowed from last Sunday's *New York Times* obituary of computer scientist / philosopher Amir Pnueli. Temporal Logic is a formal system of logical reasoning used to evaluate statements whose truth changes over time. Dr. Pnueli did not invent this branch of logic, but he was the first to apply it to the operation of computer systems, with his fundamental 1977 paper, "The Temporal Logic of Programs."

Before Dr. Pnueli, self-taught Oxford professor Arthur Norman Prior rigorously articulated Temporal Logic and gave the subject its name. Of course, the multi-part problem of truth as it varies over time sits at the root of the basic philosophical problems of determinism and free will. However, Prior's Temporal Logic specifically distills the fundamental concepts of a truth which is negotiated over time into a mathematically rigorous logical language whose formality and abstraction allows it to address an infinitely wide scope of truth claims, and to remain specific in its conclusions.

Prior built his temporal logic on the work of nineteenth-century philosopher-mathematician Charles Sanders Pierce. Pierce, who also coined the philosophically-proper term "Pragmatism," argued for a logic which makes accommodation for the changing truth of a statement over time. As within the wider scope of Pragmatism, Pierce argued that truth must be determined fully contingent on the present situation and that truth is actually *produced* by this negotiation, or "back and forth with the world."

When he started teaching logic at Canterbury University and publishing his work, Prior knew only modest mathematics and was almost entirely self-taught in logic. He published his first logic paper at age 38, a remarkably late debut in mathematics where the best thinking is said to be all done by age 28. Prior published his seminal book fully articulating Temporal Logic just two years before his death — *Past, Present, Future* (1967).

The practical value of Prior's Temporal Logic is being able to speak concretely, precisely, of the past, present, and future at the same time — at the only time that it is ever possible to actually bring an idea into the world — the (continuous) present. I am tired. I have been tired. I will be tired. I have already been tired. I will probably not always be tired. Then, to bed, for now. (DS) ∎



*Gareth Spor's Dreammachine at 45 rpm as described by HP Scanjet G3110 at 600 dpi. Photograph by Waleed Beshty*

# REMINGTON LAUNCHES GHOSTWRITER

HARTFORD, CT — Shortly after buying his Remington Model 1 typewriter, Mark Twain dashed a letter off to his brother in 1875. In his note, he seems equal parts addled and satisfied with his new purchase:

"I am trying to get the hang of this new fangled writing machine, but am not making a shining success of it. [. . . ] I believe it will print faster than I can write. One may lean back in his chair & work it. It piles an awful stack of words on one page. It don't muss things or scatter ink blots around. Of course it saves paper."

Knowing they had a notable writer for a customer, Remington's salespeople contacted Twain to see if he'd vouch publicly for their Remington Model 2, which he'd purchased as soon as it was released. In a typed note of all caps he declined, signing off not as Twain, but with his given name, Samuel Clemens:

"Please do not use my name in any way. Please do not even divulge the fact that I own a machine. I have entirely stopped using the Type-Writer, for the reason that I never could write a letter with it to anybody without receiving a request by return mail that I would not only describe the machine but state what progress I had made in the use of it, etc., etc. I don't like to write letters, so I don't want people to know that I own this curiously breeding little joker. Yours truly, Saml. L. Clemens."

It's easy to speculate as to why Twain might've signed his note as Clemens. He routinely signed "Sam" to friends and used Clemens both in business and for personal notes. Perhaps he didn't want his more famous pen name used in any way with Remington's products, so he refused to even sign it. But it also seems at least a little bit possible that when he wrote as Twain, Clemens felt he had a kind of creative power he did not possess as Clemens alone, but that when he wrote with the Remington it had a kind of power over him, and even over Twain, that made them both uncomfortable, even anxious. "Mark Twain" started out not as a given name but as a sailor's pseudonym. Before that it was a sailor's call — "mark twain!" — meaning the river's depth was two fathoms (12 feet) deep, and that could navigate its passage safely. When Clemens selected Mark Twain, he selected not only the name of a storyteller but the sign of a technician, who, with this piece of information, could signal the crew that the ship was in control and could be guided safely down its course.

Cybernetics, which is the study of communication and control between humans and machines, takes its name from the Greek 'kybernetes," who is the oarsman, pilot, or rudder: the one who can skillfully bring a boat to port. Clemens's pseudonym, Twain, was another name for the author himself. But, according to his letters, his typewriter often behaved as an allonym — a ghostwriter. While the pen name Twain helped the man Clemens in control of the writing process, the Remington's ghostwriter effect counteracted that control, placing the invention of how and how just beyond its operator's reach, or total understanding.

Like Twain, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's experience with his Hansen Writing Ball, a typewriter Nietzsche purchased in 1882 directly from its inventor, seemed somehow beyond his control — more supernatural. Living in Genoa with his eyesight failing, Nietzsche hoped the writing ball would make it easier for him to write away from home, but he arrived to find his machine damaged in transit. The Hansen's already fussy keys only became more difficult in inclement weather. "The typewriter has been unusable since my last card," Nietzsche wrote, "for the weather is dreary and cloudy, that is, humid: then each time the ribbon is also wet and sticky, so that every key gets stuck, and the writing cannot be seen at all." The typewriter, which was meant to free Nietzsche from his pen and make it easier for him to write, had left him blocked. No longer in control of his own output, Nietzsche's productivity would now rise and fall with the barometer. By 1882, he'd pounded out a well-known poem, which reads, "The Writing Ball is a thing like me: of iron / Yet twisted easily — especially on journeys. / Patience and tact must be had in abundance / As well as fine [little] fingers to use it." As Professor Friedrich Kittler points out in his study *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, in Nietzsche's poem, "three moments of writing coincide: the equipment, the thing, and the agent. An author, however, does not appear [. . . ] Our writing tool not only works on our thoughts, it "is a thing like me."

Nietzsche would soon give up his typewriter, but he would never dismiss it entirely. In one of his last typewritten letters, he observes, "This machine is delicate as a little dog and causes a lot of trouble — and *provides some objectionables*. Now all my friends have to learn to write[a] letting their machine: otherwise I will fall behind myself and won't be able to supply myself with sufficient intellectual nourishment." Nietzsche feared his own typewriter might outproduce him. Its mechanistic drive to produce text faster than its owner could read it harkens back to the sense that Twain described previously, when he was first entranced by the typewriter in the shop. Fifty-seven words a minute! If only he could write that fast. But recall that the salesgirl who'd impressed Twain had a trick: she always typed the same text, over and over and over again. In Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, in a throwaway stone image of typewriter-as-ghostwriter, the ceaselessly repeated typescript reappears as Wendy discovers that her husband Jack's novel isn't a novel at all. Instead, he has typed "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" on sheet after endless sheet. Jack isn't using his Adler typewriter; the Adler is using him. Realizing her husband has lost his mind, Wendy's face pales, terrified.

Kubrick's film is fictional, but cautionary. Kittler, too, tells of a 1941 detective play by Jean Cocteau called *La Machine à écrire* (*The Typewriter*) involving "an unknown woman who has been tormenting her community with anonymous typewritten letters." Kittler continues, "[the detective] imagines the culprit at work at her typewriter, examining and operating her machine gun.' Typewriters are simply 'fast,' not just 'like Jazz' [. . . ] but also like rapid-fire weapons." When Cocteau's antiheroine finally confesses, she explains, "I wanted to attack the whole city. [. . . ] I wanted to stir that mark, attack and reveal it. It was like a hoax! Without accounting for myself, I chose the dirtiest and cheapest of all weapons, the typewriter." She terrorizes the city with the stroke of a key.

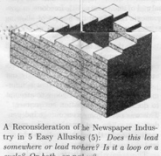
A vividly real and far more terrorizing letter from an anonymous typist was received by *The New York Times* on 26 April 1995. It had been keyed on an old machine later identified as a 1920s-era L.C. Smith-Corona. Enclosed was a lengthy typewritten manifesto that began, "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." *The New York Times* shared the letter with the FBI, which believed that it was from a domestic terrorist known as the Unabomber. The letter demanded that the manifesto be published "in The New York *Times, Time* or *Newsweek*, or in some other widely read, nationally distributed periodical," and, it promised, "if you can get it published according to our requirements we will permanently desist from terrorist activities." As for the text, its author stipulated that "after six months from the first appearance of the article or book it must become public property, so that anyone can reproduce or publish it." Also: "because of its length, we suppose it will have to be serialized."

*The Washington Post* instead opted to print the text whole as a four-page supplement that September. It would prove to be the Unabomber's undoing. The following April, authorities raided the one-room cabin of a former UC Berkeley professor named Theodore Kaczynski, whose brother had called in a tip that Kaczynski's writings reminded him the Unabomber's. By the time they finished their search, they'd found the smoking gun, amidst firearms, handmade bombs, and various disguises, sitting on a desk littered with carbon copies of the letters and manifesto, was the Smith-Corona. (RG) ∎

# HEY MANHATTAN

One five three five / For your information battalion one is requesting Hazmat / One five three seven / Ten four / Battalion one / Five people on the boat / Hazmat battalion / Thank you Manhattan / Ten calling Hazmat battalion / Go ahead Manhattan / Can you confirm with the first battalion if the Ellis Island ferry is docked on the Manhattan side / I was unable to contact a representative from the New Jersey police / Ten four / Hazmat battalion was unable to reach anyone on the Jersey side / Ten four / First battalion / We are i touch with the New Jersey side / We are going to let everyone off the boat / Hazmat battalion / Ten four / Negative for Jersey authorities / We are letting people off the boat / Battalion one / Hazmat one / HeyManhattan / Subway near the Atlantic wal / Unknown / They say they have a unit in the scene / ten four / One five one four / Can you call it city wide / City wide one five seven oh / Fire apartment on eddy / Repeating a fire apartment 1A / Battalion two seven / Two seven / We are going to leave it a four two for your response / Forty two w just got a phone call from transit that you were holding up a train, is that correct / We had to momentarily, but it's long gone / Fortytwo thank you / Battalion two / One five four nine Manhattan / Ten four / Wheel hair hound occupant needing to get up too / Automatic alarm in a private dwelling / 's been out for a few minutes already / To four / No injury no EMS needed / Ten fur / Division one five / Sixteen hundred hours / Construction fire between avenue X an T. / Tom / Reporting a fire on the fourth floor / Brooklyn battalion three eight / Four nine seven fire on the fourth floor / Isolated wings floors number A B C D vents on roof / South side exposure / One six oh five dispatching one oh seven / Ten twenty box three nine oh / One six oh six / Dispatching two oh seven / Ten four on way / Standby / One five six / Three eight six / Ten four will notify / One four four / Central alarm company who called this in / One six oh eight dispatch two oh seven / One six oh eight Manhattan / Transformer emergency / Engine one five six / Ten four / Engine one five six / ConEd has been notified they have a crew responding / Recorded fire on a roof of a multiple dwelling / One six one three / EMS Kennedy bridge unknown direction for an auto accident / Calling battalion four nine / One six oh five Manhattan / Ten four / One six one seven hours / Apartment four D occupant just arrived home there was a water leak we shut it down / Two six three / Heading into Manhattan reported motor vehicle accident / Let me know if you see anything going in / Cse six two one five five / Four nine to Manhattan / ten thirty six It's going to be a code three / Box three one / Smoke coming from a building on the corner / Battalion two two / Ten four / Incident going eastbound / O e six three / Ten four / Grand central eastbound / Engine two six three / Battalion four five / Ten four / Bus fire / Engine two eight two / Six nine / Battalion two oh seven / One six two nine oh

Luigi Sono, None (Natl. Hour), November 14 (PE) ∎



A Reconsideration of the Newspaper Industry in 5 Easy Albums (3): *Does this lead somewhere or lead nowhere? Is it a loop or a cycle? Or both, or neher?*

# MUCH FUSSED OVER PUSSY

EVERYWHERE, NOWHERE — It's easy to imagine today's newspaper office like the opening scene to a zombie film: pairs of eyes that look like they were purchased in junk shops and white shirt sleeves in yards late fleeting their own brain. Newspapermen used to ask the questions, as a hemophiliac economic model has made the reporter the reported, an internal investigator who fact-checks his own demise and cashes in his office hours with a self-administered proctology exam. Like the MTA, he stares dumbstruck at this rot is in constant rotation and maintenance. Is this circulation asphyxiation more an autopsy than a prognosis? And who is the no-man we are most afraid of leaving behind — the pulpy medium the grimy journalist, or the language itself?

When the business model changed, so did the news. On September 3, 1833, twenty-three-year-old publisher Benjamin Day launched the American penny paper as the industry it is today. Undercutting his competitors by a fifth, he sold his *New York Sun* for just a penny. The paper was funded by advertisers, not subscribers, and sold on the street; it no longer catered only to the Eustace Tilleys, but to those just beginning to fumble with words.

The bargain paper found a salesman in Bernard Flaherty, hired as the first newspaper boy. This single-hello stamped him as an archetype of a long-mouth little middle man and revolutionized not only the way information circulated but the way it was editorialized. Uneducated but not un-newsed, the newsboy memorized the morning paper like a proverb and broadcast it like a transmitter. Fed on commission, these newsies sold headlines as front-row seats to the world's greatest drama. Plot-rumped Fact, and the headlines became the high blood pressure entertainment narcotic we equate with current page-six ecology. Editorial instincts pursued this new sensational imperative and resulting increases in readership determined that the penny paper's most accessible emotions were indignation, apocalyptic glee, and rage.

Beginning in 1911 theologian Mordecai Kaplan, a Lithuanian immigrant, began recording the harmless data of his existence. He inclosed and disclosed the very air he breathed. Despite h American following, Kaplan suffered from a acute anxiety of presence. Consumed by he prospect of his religious influence outlasting his physical life, his fanatical scrawlin engaged an unrelenting desire to create permanence. For the next twenty-one years, he assembled a material echo of self, an archive of journals eventually comprising a personal Encyclopedia of Man.

But isn't the act f recording, as well as the record itself, about becoming rather than being? When a newspaper editor in New York asked who was going to write Kaplan's obituary, a staff write responded, "Kaplan already did."

Obituaries are irrocable, but when the newspaper is the cause, the cat suddenly has nine hundred live. The newspaper, our much fussed over puss, began dying in 1765. These first last word were printed as *The Pennsylvania Journa* suffering from a terminal British Stamp ct, designed the front page like a tombstone."EXPIRING: In Hopes of a Resurrection to Life again . . . " The editors knew that death, even if it was their own, was a hot commodity.

The anxiety over our newspapers's own extinction leaves us in a rhetorical editorial tailspin, asking impulsive questions that don't welcome answers and feeling like monkeys making faces in the vacuum. Questioning the newspapers's mortality quickly becomes about our sense of civil geography and homeostasis. We are always the observer and the observed. We are always our own headline.

How long could a eulogy last in a twenty-four hour medium? When will our newspaper look funny and antiquated on someone the way suspenders do? When it goes Jurassic, when we are finally looking at it, a little gray cookie stamp, in the palm of our hand, what will we say? Where will the knowledge get lost in the obituary, as Kaplan feared? Will the martyrdom give you whiplash? Will the writer be on red alert with the hypertension headlines with which we chase storms and terrorists (a hyperbolic farewell)? Or will he gently ease into a first person retirement speech (a we-had-a-good-run farewell)? Or will he go balls and marbles crazy (a that's-all-folks farewell)? Should "*New York Times* is No Longer Fit For Print" (a tongue in your cheek farewell) be . . . is . . . was . . . will be?

Today, the news shows signs of water. Militants killed 17 outside a courthouse in Peshawar. A British helicopter with a failed night system shot itself down over Afghanistan. The temperature is forty-seven. The humidity is eighty-nine. (SS) ∎

*How Media Masters Reality #6*

# CORRECT ME IF I'M WRONG

TIVOLI, NY — "Feedback is a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance," according to Norbert Wiener.

In this series of six articles, *How Media Masters Reality*, we've described the media as a feedback loop that collapses the difference between producer and consumer. As users of email and social networking sites or as participants in non-scripted TV shows we work to provide content for formats that are owned by somebody else. At the base of this media ecosystem we generate and trade information, and as we accrue it — lots of friends on Facebook, lots of photos on Flickr, a massive list of email addresses — we use it to heighten our visibility and increase our value as self-performing commodities. Although celebrities float at the top of the information economy's celestial canopy, they are constituted as media subjects by the same stuff as you and me: bits of information feeding back through the system.

Although scripted forms of entertainment remain dominant, non-scripted TV is gaining ground during primetime. This is partly because non-scripted TV is simply cheap to produce, but also because it constructs a narrative about TV production that the medium feeds back into itself. In this new narrative, you the viewer are the central character and, if you work hard enough, you get a speaking part. And why fill the screen with shovel-board Colgate-clean actors when the screen time can be filled with someone more or less like you and me?

The non-scripted TV show doesn't only give us the opportunity to perform, it also provides us with the means to assess, test, and judge people more or less like ourselves — and to be assessed, tested, and judged by people more or less like ourselves. The feedback between watching and doing constitutes a pan-media surveillance system in which we police ourselves, and in which we translate the duties and obligations that are thrust upon us (to be always "on," to be conspicuously visible, to be incredibly busy, to acquiesce to the judgement of our peers) into choices . . . into *freedom*. So "freedom of information" translates into us all giving things away for free — our talents as performers, as programmers, as content providers.

It's easy to forget how old the idea of the audience as commodity is. We should have seen it coming. In 1975, the same year that Ant Farm mounted their spectacular anti-media offensive, B. Livant wrote: "Virtually everyone is organized into the complex tapestry of those audiences, whose underlying priorities we are just beginning to understand. For one thing, the production, destruction, division, and recombination of audiences is a wasteful and turbulent motion. For another, the Audience Commodity is a multipurpose capacity. It is the other side of labor power that Marx discovered in the production of commodities-in-general; and it is Protean in its capacities. The first great form of the organization of this commodity by the Audience Commodity as a market. This form emerged first historically and with the greatest clarity in the United States . . . This form is the first, but not the last."

Although the grandiloquence of this text speaks of a bygone time, it nevertheless proposes an understanding of media which classic Marxist media critique failed to fully recognize. Dallas W. Smythe takes up the story, pointing out that the only time we're not productive is when we're asleep, because our waking time is itself sold as a commodity to advertisers. Audience production is the material connection between advertisers and content providers — audiences are as much commodities as TV sets and cars. The difference is that you can't sell a car to a TV set but you can sell an audience to an audience.

The end product of the media machine, therefore, is not the passive consumer living in a relationship of "bad faith" with the products they consume, because in the post-mass media world there is no endpoint, as the producer-consumer feeds back production in the form of content in the form of participation. The spectacle doesn't alienate us from the real and make us passive; it unremittingly seeks to involve us, requiring us to test ourselves, measure ourselves, retain visibility as a self-performing commodity. This excitation is fed back through the system and comes out as the narrative of the hard-working, self-reliant, independent, efficient, networked individual.

For optimists, the shift to self-performance — the demand to be as visible as possible — affords new opportunities for freedom, as new technological devices give access to more information and to new modes of social interaction. In this reading, we are caught in a virtuous feedback loop in which desire can be expressed and fulfilled, and in which technology will ultimately take care of the inequalities in the world. But we've heard all this before. Every technological innovation comes with the promise of greater personal freedom and social equality. The chemical technology of drugs turned the hippies on to a communal future that ended in ruins. The technologies of community radio stations and video collectives sporting Portapaks and satellite dishes promised a future where, once again, technology would help to build a cozy global village. And the dream was revived yet again when Howard Rheingold announced the "virtual community," a new "Jeffersonian democracy" of cybernetic free expression.

So we come to the stage where, to be part of the virtual community, we are entreated at every turn to have our say. But who wants to listen to my opinion on Britney's mental stability, Kirstie's waistline, Barack's Middle East strategy . . . and you know what I think of global warming? I hate it!

Anyone who would value my ill-informed opinion on these matters already understands knowledge to be radically provisional. If the crop circle maker and the flat earther fight with the Pulitzer Prize winner for my attention — and I am called on to evaluate all three — what kind of hierarchy of knowledge production are we dealing with? The "have your say" principle represents the uncoupling of democracy from democratic institutions. It floats freely in a bubble of self-legitimation.

Throughout the twentieth century, "public opinion" was regarded as something to be feared, but it was also understood as something that could be fashioned. The public could be educated in regimes of self-improvement and self-maintenance. The rise of social policies such as the Welfare State and the New Deal corresponded with the rise of the public information documentary, in which knowledge was mediated by *the expert* — the man (always a man) in the white coat. Knowledge was "democratizing" on both sides of the Atlantic, but people had to learn how to learn. As Otto Neurath, the pioneer of public education, put it in the 1933: "We consider our selves the executive agent of the spectators. In order to do this it is necessary to simplify and eliminate things, he who makes the better choice will be the better pedagogue." Everything from education to inoculation was championed. In the U.S., the role of information provision was soon taken over by major corporations, and as the Cold War got hotter, the same techniques were applied to civil defense media.

As far as factual, instructive documentary is concerned, our current position is ambiguous. While these days we reflexively tend to suspect some form of "propaganda" at play, we're also comforted by the worldview presented by such as the Discovery Channel and National Geographic. There's nothing as reassuring as a matter of fact clearly conveyed.

Perhaps these six installments of *How Media Masters Reality* have painted a bleak picture of us as lab rats in our own experiment — or maybe something like a post-mass media Merovingian Beach, painting of which the dunned labor on the eternal work of being watched. But once we gain knowledge of how media masters reality, we might begin to work out ways of finding our freedom within it. French philosopher Michel Foucault was once asked: If we are socially constructed, is conscious change possible? Foucault turned the question on its head. We actually don't realize how free we are, there are more freedoms than the horizon of the humanist tradition can show us, and the one thing we can learn from the development of human thought is that change is inevitable. (SR) ∎

*How Media Masters Reality* was informed by many sources, including: Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*; Richard Barbrook & Andy Cameron, *The California Ideology*; Jack Z. Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics, Political Rationality and Popular Culture*; Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*; John Conner, *Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions (with Afterword)*; Daniel Dayan & Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*; Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on Control Societies*; Rod Dickinson & Steve Rushton, *Who, What, Where, When, Why & How*; Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973–1974 and Technologies of the Self*; Peter Galison, *The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision*; Katerine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer and How We Became Postmodern*; Alison Hern, *Hoaz-ing the Real*; David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*; Constance M. Lewallen & Steve Said, *Ant Farm 1968–1978*; Sven Lütticken, *An Arena in Which to Re-enact*; Ted Magder, *Television 2.0: The Business of American Television in Transition*; Rux Martin, *Truth, Power, Self*; Michael Massing, *A New Horizon for the Media and The News Ahead*; Dr. Timothy Matthews, 14 and 15, volume 1.1; NYRB; Anna McCarthy, *Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt & Me*; Patricia Mellencamp, *Video Politics: Guerrilla TV, Ant Farm, Eternal Frame*; Laurie Ouellette, *"Take Responsibility for Yourself": Judge Judy and the Neo-liberal Citizen*; Susan Murry & Laurie Ouellette (eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*; Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*; Felicity D. Scott, *Living Architec 7: Ant Farm; Allegorical Time Warp: The Media Fallout of July 21, 1969*; Richard Serra, *Television Delivers People*; Michael Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*; Dallas W. Smythe, *On the Audience Commodity*; Ted Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*; Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or, Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine* and *God and Golem, Inc.*



$0 \div 0 \rightarrow 0$

CHICAGO — If you've read newspapers regularly for the past two decades, probably you encountered higher mathematics once: when Andrew Wiles proved Fermat's Last Theorem in 1994. Maybe you paid enough attention to notice when the Poincaré Conjecture was confirmed in 2006. If you haven't encountered anything else on math, it's not your fault — zero divided by anything is still zero. Why isn't there popular-press coverage of mathematics?

BECAUSE IT'S TOO OBSCURE. An unspoken premise here is that the press doesn't cover obscure things. Take as a simple counterexample the *New York Times* article of 29 titled "7.3 Billion Light-Years Later, Einstein's Theory Prevails," which includes this sentence: "Some theorists have suggested that space on very small scales has a granular structure that would speed some light waves faster than others — in short, that relativity could break down on the smallest scales."

BECAUSE IT'S TOO DIFFICULT. Difficult things make the paper every day: healthcare reform, complex political scandals, explaining the financial crash, and, as was already mentioned, science. It's the job of the journalist to simplify complicated topics by prioritizing the information she collects and finding clear ways to express it. In journalism, the reader need not understand everything about the topic on a visceral level — hard-news stories are written so that a reader who quits reading in the middle will still have hit the main point. Readers of news first learn the main outline and why it's important, then fill in broad strokes, then smaller details. There's no *a priori* reason why math can't be presented in this model.

BECAUSE IT'S TOO BORING. Boring is in the eye of the benumbed. Scores of readers never open the sports section. Rafts of them never read travel. Masses won't touch religion.

BECAUSE IT DOESN'T TALK ABOUT THE REAL WORLD. Math's real-world applications are no farther afield than science-page darlings like cosmology and string theory.

BECAUSE IT TAKES TOO LONG TO EXPLAIN ANYTHING. The article-lengthening terminology gap exists in writing about other specialized disciplines. When the Large Hadron Collider opened on the Swiss-French border, articles defined the still-theoretical Higgs boson as "a subatomic particle that would give matter mass." Math terms can be explained, too, at least inasmuch as a casual reader needs to understand them.

BECAUSE IT'S TOO RIGOROUS. Now we're getting somewhere. Math people are probably already sputtering that casual readers won't really get it if simplistic explanations present just the broad strokes of their work. Here's the central conflict: *Really getting it isn't the point of journalism.* Math is about rigor. A mathematical statement enters the body of knowledge when it is proved. Journalism is about importance. A story is successful when it imparts the most important tidbits of information with the greatest concision.

Science doesn't pose this conflict. The minimization of unavoidable error and weighing of the statistical significance of correlation coefficients don't come from the world of 100 percent certainty. Philosophy suffers as math does — if you can name a philosophy publication other than *On Bullshit* from the past 20 years, gold star.

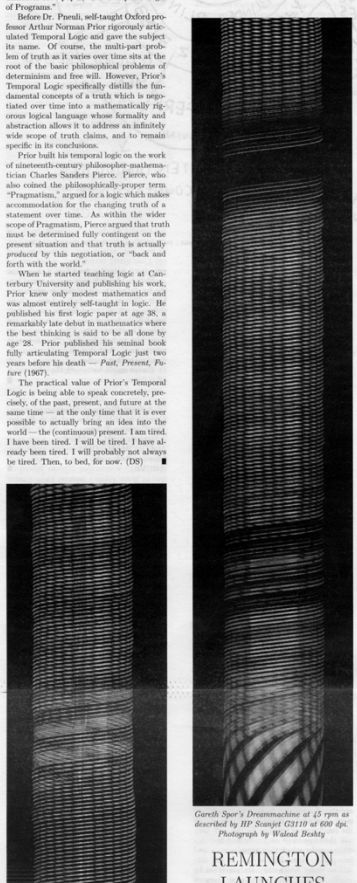
BECAUSE PEOPLE DON'T LIKE IT. People don't like it because they can't wrap their minds around it. They can't wrap their minds around it because no one presents it accessibly. No one presents it accessibly because people don't like it. That's really the essence of it, but geometers would call that argument circular. (GM) ∎



"Well that's that cleared up then," said Dick. "Shall we go down the lower road for a walk? We should leave these two to get on and catch up. It's been a while. Coming?"

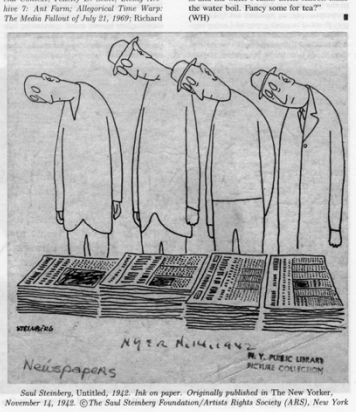
"K," Anna stood up and began to clear away the bowls and Dick asked if we wanted tea. I gave him a wide-eyed smile. He picked up the board: by now strewn with crusts, rinds and crumbs, and used the bread knife to scrape these together and into the bowl on top of the stack.

All this happened out of eyeshot and the old man stared ahead. As they went out the door onto the outside porch, he spoke loudly through the window, mouthing, "Dick, could you go down to the beach below the old toll house, by the mermaid, on your way back? Ian's down there. You know." Getting up to stop the kettle whistling, he said, "Came down to stay and do a bit of sea fishing. Mackerel come in here really close to the water's edge at this time of year, when the tide's in and the water's calm. Little shoals make the water boil. Fancy some for tea?" (WH) ∎



CAPTION CARTOON CONTEST

(CA) *"What a misunderstanding!"*




*Saul Steinberg, Untitled, 1942. Ink on paper. Originally published in* The New Yorker, *November 14, 1942. ©The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York*

## 6.9: OP-ED, STOP PRESS, REVIEW

We continued to begin each edition with a brief Op-Ed piece at top-left. To give some idea of how all the technical vicissitudes effected the writing and editing, here's one of those editorials from the fifth edition on 18 November. Quickly written on the day of publication, each one was designed to allude to the overarching project as much as it's ostensible subject.

# MASS INNOCULATION AGAINST BACTERIA OF DOUBT

PORT AUTHORITY — In late 1977, New York's favorite gonzo-rock journalist, Lester Bangs, wrote a three-part serialized account of touring with English punk / new wave band The Clash for British weekly *New Musical Express.* The assignment found Bangs in a funk, saying *things started going downhill for rock about 1968, culminating in the ascendance of things like disco and jazzrock, which are dead enough to suggest the end of popular music as we know it,* to the point of *thinking about giving up writing about music altogether.*

But Bangs was pried out of resignation by a sudden demand for coverage of the U.K. punk scene which, within one year of its initial explosion, was merely repeating *the very attitudes it copped (BOREDOM and INDIFFERENCE)* — a sorry state which amounted to capitulation rather than construction. Instead, Bangs was on the trail of a *persistent humanism* in spite of the fact that *one of the most uncool things you can do these days is to be committed about anything.*

Joining the tour jet-lagged and combative, with a friend's advice to *ask 'em just exactly what their political program is, what they intend to do once past all the bullshit rhetoric,* Lester begins his relationship with the band by unleashing a battery of questions along the lines of *Blah blah blah depersonalization blab blab blab solipsism blah blah yip yap Blah blab no one wants to have emotions anymore blab blip human heart an endangered species blab blare cultural fascism blab blurb etc. etc. etc.* which is immediately met with laughter, then disarmed by the offhand response: *If it bothers you so much why don't you do something about it?*

In a telling incident, one of the band asks Lester, *my room is full tonight; can Adrian stay with you?*, gesturing at one of the fans. Bangs is outraged, makes a scene, then discovers, to his considerable amazement, that indeed the band regularly houses acquaintances and fans on tour. At which point he is forced to consider the degree to which his own attitude is shaped by his standard experience of large-scale U.S. bands' tours, i.e. *involving goddam pigs who have the usual burly cops of hired thugs to keep the fans away from them at all costs.* By contrast, *the way the Clash treat their fans falls so far outside the normal run of things as to be outright revolutionary.*

From here on, Bangs realizes why *it wasn't necessary to do any boring interviews about politics or the class system or any of that — because here is a band which not only preaches something good but practices it as well.* The way the band interact with their audience, *instead of talking about changes in social behavior puts the model of a truly egalitarian practice in their own conduct.* Even better is the band's response to his telling them as much: *Oh, so that's gonna be the hook for your story then?*

Which it is, along with the unanswered question he lets hang: how long the group can *continue to practice total egalitarianism in the face of mushrooming popularity?*

Well-aware of his proclivity to rant, generalize, polemicize, Bangs concludes anyway, saying *you may say I take liberties, and you are right, but I will have done my good deed for the day if I can make you see that the whole point is YOU SHOULD BE TAKING LIBERTIES TOO. Nothing is inscribed so deep that a little eyewash won't uproot it, that's the whole point of so-called "new wave" — to REINVENT YOURSELF AND EVERYTHING AROUND YOU CONSTANTLY.*
(DS) ■

The last few column inches of the last edition announced the project's conclusion:



"FIRST/LAST" NEWSPAPER TO FOLD AFTER SIX EDITIONS

DEXter Sinister commemorated the printing of their final *First/Last Newspaper* and closing of their Port Authority office Saturday night, November 21 from 7 – 9pm. Visitors were able to collect remaining stock produced during the paper's brief three-week existence, including the latest and last just delivered from Linco Printers in neighboring Long Island City. Also present in the Port Authority Space, at the corner of 41st Street and Eighth Avenue, was Gareth Spor's version of Brion Gysin's seminal 1960s Dream Machine — a stencilled cylinder placed on a revolving turntable with a 100-watt lamp inside to produce a stroboscopic flicker that induces a supposedly hypnagogic state when viewed with eyes closed. Spor's update replaces Gysin's original pattern with open letterforms that spell out an aphorism by Gysin's friend and collaborator William Burroughs: "Illusion is a Revolutionary Weapon." The public was advised that this machine may be dangerous for people with photosensitive epilepsy or other nervous disorders. Also available were portions of fish and chips wrapped in old issues of *TF/LN*. Due to concerns over ink poisoning, particularly related to old lead type, the tradition of wrapping fish and chips in newsprint has largely been phased out despite industry workers's claims that modern newspaper inks such as those used in Queens pose no such health risks. Today's chip paper, tomorrow's news, as the old Fleet Street saying goes. Surely this is, at last, the "artless art." Sinister stressed that they would assume no responsibility for the public's epilepsy or poisoning. (DS) ■

As it happened, on the same day, *The New York Times* had run a brief review of the project in their 'Weekend Arts' section – a commentary that, inasmuch as it was reporting something that had actually closed before the text could be read, was already obsolete.

Funnily enough, we'd quoted Italian critic Germano Celant in that column at the centre of our template: 'As soon as this text is written it will be full of holes.'[52] Ideally, of course, the holes are as telling as the text they punctuate.[53]

[52] Celant, 'Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrila War', op. cit.

[53] A couple of months later we reconstituted the entire project as *Dot Dot Dot* #19, 2010. The six PDFs were digitally cut-and-pasted to fit into the journal's format, and printed on same newsprint by the same printer in Queens.



KATIE ORLINSKY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

"The First/Last Newspaper" by Dexter Sinister.

## Dexter Sinister

### 'The First/Last Newspaper'

*Port Authority Bus Terminal, Blank SL8*
*641 Eighth Avenue, at 41st Street*
*Through Sunday*

In dire days for print journalism, it warms the heart to see a new newspaper appear. And one called, somewhat enigmatically, The First/Last Newspaper, began printing in Manhattan earlier this month. Its offices are a barren-looking storefront on the Eighth Avenue side of the Port Authority bus terminal, as it happens diagonally across from The New York Times Building.

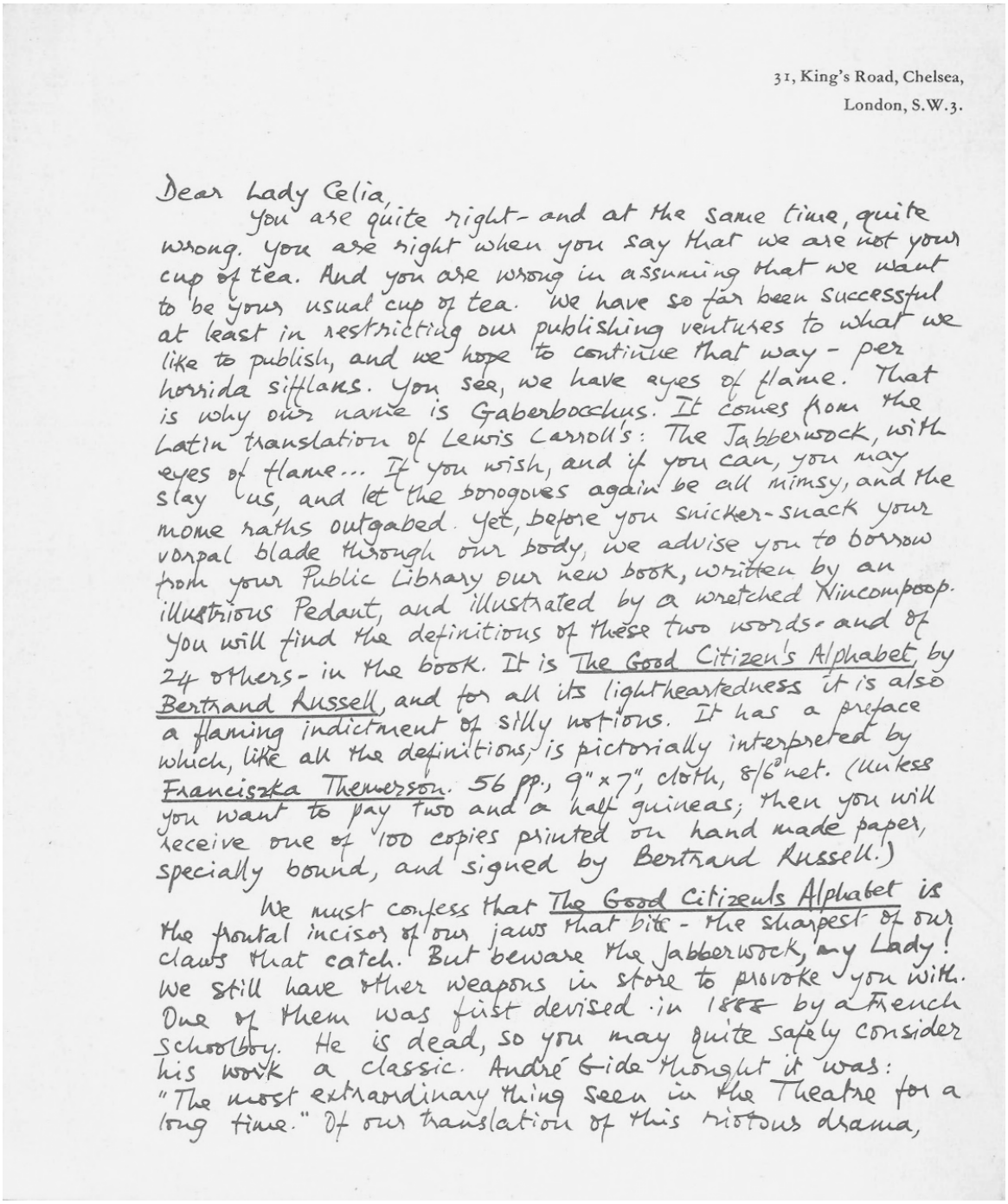
Competition? Size-wise, no. The First/Last is basically a two-man operation, the partners being David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey. Together they form the guerrilla-ish, digital-aversive designing/writing/publishing collective called Dexter Sinister, which has a permanent home in a Lower East Side basement and takes up impermanent residence in various art-world festival situations, like the recent New York Art Book Fair, the 2008 Whitney Biennial and the current citywide Performa 09, which, along with the Times Square Alliance, is the First/Last Newspaper's sponsor.

With assistance from Brendan Dalton and Anne Callahan, and what the paper describes as "hastily assembled staff of international writers and photographers" (desks in Glasgow; Geneva; Palo Alto, Calif.; and Tivoli in upstate New York), the editors have been turning out an extra-large format, no-color broadsheet twice weekly since Nov. 3, printing in Long Island City, Queens, distributing copies shopping-bag-on-subway style, and passing them out to whoever wanders into the Port Authority newsroom.

The paper's contents? Semi-news (up-to-the-minute reports mixed with reprints from various sources from 1968, 1982 and other years), lots of opinionated cultural and media analysis, almost nothing — to be accurate, absolutely nothing — in the sports, dining, automobile and obituary departments, but a hefty amount of what seems to be fiction, or what is now referred to as creative nonfiction. The tone overall: extremely smart (brainy plus street-smart), sardonic, Dada-intensive.

There are still some bugs to be worked out. As I say, the reporting-opinion divide is a little iffy. And headline writing is in need of style guidelines, ranging as it does in one issue from "Headless Body, Topless Bars" to "Large Hadron Collider Expected to Fail Due to Backwards Causation, Massive Elementary Particle Predicted Plus Standard Model and Colliding Beam Synchrotron Particle Accelerator Explained."

But time for adjustments is short. In fact, it's over. The First/Last Newspaper will fold on Sunday after a mere six issues, a willing victim of planned and tightly scheduled obsolescence. The good news: Dexter Sinister will soldier on, continuing to pioneer and provoke in the print world it so loves/hates. *HOLLAND COTTER*



31, King's Road, Chelsea,
London, S.W.3.

Dear Lady Celia,

You are quite right - and at the same time, quite wrong. You are right when you say that we are not your cup of tea. And you are wrong in assuming that we want to be your usual cup of tea. We have so far been successful at least in restricting our publishing ventures to what we like to publish, and we hope to continue that way - per horrida sifflans. You see, we have eyes of flame. That is why our name is Gaberbocchus. It comes from the Latin translation of Lewis Carroll's: The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame... If you wish, and if you can, you may slay us, and let the borogoves again be all mimsy, and the mome raths outgabed. Yet, before you snicker-snack your vorpal blade through our body, we advise you to borrow from your Public Library our new book, written by an illustrious Pedant, and illustrated by a wretched Nincompoop. You will find the definitions of these two words - and of 24 others - in the book. It is The Good Citizen's Alphabet, by Bertrand Russell, and for all its lightheartedness it is also a flaming indictment of silly notions. It has a preface which, like all the definitions, is pictorially interpreted by Franciszka Themerson. 56 pp., 9" x 7", cloth, 8/6 net. (Unless you want to pay two and a half guineas; then you will receive one of 100 copies printed on hand made paper, specially bound, and signed by Bertrand Russell.)

We must confess that The Good Citizens Alphabet is the frontal incisors of our jaws that bite - the sharpest of our claws that catch. But beware the Jabberwock, my Lady! We still have other weapons in store to provoke you with. One of them was first devised in 1888 by a French schoolboy. He is dead, so you may quite safely consider his work a classic. André Gide thought it was: "The most extraordinary thing seen in the Theatre for a long time." Of our translation of this riotous drama,

Stefan Themerson, cover of a four-page leaflet for Gaberbocchus Press, c. 1953

# 7: ARTICULATE OBJECTS

This chapter elaborates on how work can be thought of as 'self-captioning', in the sense that it 'speaks for itself' without recourse to external support, and more generally how this is constituent of a particular set of ethics. 'Teaching a reader how to read' begins with an overview of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which tells the story of how early 19th-century pedagog Joseph Jacotot taught using objects equally strange to both 'master' and student. Next I note some thoughts by Bernard Stiegler on what it means to *actively* read something, in the sense that it changes or 'individuates' the reader; then how that payoff is ideally transmitted across generations to form 'long circuits' of culture. These days, he says, those circuits are becoming ever shorter, and their re-activation increasingly urgent. Switching to literature, I consider David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* a case in point – and an example of his mandate to 'remind readers how smart they are'.

In 'Modernism as a tool', I examine Robin Kinross's use of the term 'articulate product', with particular reference to a conversation with graphic designer/historian Richard Hollis about how objects can be imbued with a 'didactic' aspect – that teach you how they were made, and by extension how to make them yourself, a quality they consider an enduring legacy of the modernist project. 'Reading things' hones in more specifically on what it means to 'read' articulate objects in three different fields: sociologist Bruno Latour's account of a very local key; artist Alighiero e Boetti's long-term series of outsourced *Mappa*; and the breakdown of a self-made toolrack by designer Norman Potter. To end, in 'Speak for yourselves' I consider two recent instances of prominent 'self-captioning' at the level of the exhibition rather than the individual work. These case studies, of shows by Mark Manders and Paul Elliman, are considered in light of Joseph Grigley's thoughts on the productively ambiguous status of 'exhibition prosthetics'.

In the second half of the chapter, I mean to spell out as clearly as possible the nature of the 'ethics' that I've hinted are part and parcel of the particular approach to making things described in this thesis so far. Considered in terms of art and design, this ethical disposition boils down to four aspects, manifest in a way of working that (a) *intrinsically draws form from the material, as opposed to forcing preconceived ideas onto it;* (b) *is emphatically outward-looking and so fundamentally aims to engage, connect, and communicate*; (c) *is open-ended and open-minded enough to meet and make use of contingencies encountered along the way*; and (d) *considers all aspects of a given piece of work equally important, from the superstructure to the smallest details*.

For the most part, I've so far considered how these attitudes are carried by individual artworks or designed artefacts (as well as the two exhibitions noted above); but they're far easier to apprehend as they recur across an entire body of one person's work in different contexts and formats. Inasmuch as self-reflection and doubt are fundamental to this working ethos, it's also manifest in how the work itself *changes* over time. The rest of chapter therefore leans heavily on one particular body of work, that of the Polish polymath Stefan Themerson, via two transcriptions of talks. The first, 'Lower-case ethics' is a general introduction to Themerson's own rebel decorum 'against customary modes of thought' via two longterm preoccupations: his satirical technique of 'Semantic Translation', and his account of Kurt Schwitters' work in England. Both projects passed through a number of different formats, reworked and refined over long stretches of time. And at the end of the chapter, 'So-called ephemera' considers how the same approach plays out at the other end of his ouevre, in a number of modest bits and pieces mostly written and designed as publicity for the imprint he founded together with his wife Franciszka, Gaberbocchus Press.

These parts are joined by a couple of other angles on the ethos. 'Palimpsest talks' suggests that the same spirit that marks Themerson's oeuvre is manifest in three particular works (or series of works) by three contemporary artists, Ryan Gander, Seth Price, and Mark Leckey. Each of these recent pieces seems founded on a genuine (non-ironic) desire to explain things as candidly and transparently as possible – a gesture that seems all the more pointed given that their work generally has a reputation for being the opposite, i.e obscure and esoteric. The didactic premise is emphasized by the fact that all three works are based on an overtly didactic medium, the public lecture. Moreover, each piece in each case has been amended as it passes through different formats or iterations over time, and again this revision and refinement seems part of the point. Like a lot of the individual sections here, all three

examples could reasonably fit elsewhere in the thesis – as case studies of self-reflexivity, or works in movement, or articulate objects. They are juxtaposed with the Themersons simply in hope of teasing out the ethical implications – the decency and good manners inherent in the attempt to explain stuff that isn't that easy to explain.

Which leads us into 'Friendly Fire', an exchange of letters with typographer Will Holder loosely based on our respective love/hate of the work of two outspoken artists from a century or so ago, Wyndham Lewis and Gertrude Stein. We argue over the ethics of 'good friendship'. As usual with these set pieces carried over from other contexts, the form of the piece is an attempt to embody its topic – in this case a demonstration of the 'cybernetics of conversation'.

## 7.1: TEACHING A READER HOW TO READ

French philosopher Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a French schoolteacher who, through a kind of inspired accident, discovers that he is able to teach things he doesn't know himself.[1] In exile from France following the Restoration, Jacotot was invited to teach a class of students at a university in the Flemish town of Louvain. Because neither party spoke the other's language, Jacotot searched for a common item to use as a teaching tool. He discovered a recent bilingual edition of François Fénelon's adaptation of Homer's *Telemachus*, and set his class the task of reading and discussing it in French.

Starting with the first word, relating it to the next, then deducing the relationships between individual letters to form words, words to form sentences, and so on, Jacotot made his students discuss the work they were learning to recite by heart, using the terms they learnt from the text itself. The experiment was a success: within a couple of months his students had a substantial grasp of both the book and the French language. The learning process, Jacotot observed, was played out strictly between Fénelon's intelligence and the students' intelligence – that is, *without mediation*. The chance experiment led him to conclude that 'everything is in everything', a principle that recognizes the fundamental equality between things. Once something – strictly, *anything* – is learned, it can be compared and related to anything else. Jacotot's role as a 'master' was then necessarily limited to directing his students' will to learn by asking them to continually respond to a 3-part question: (1) what do you see? (2) what do you think of it? and (3) what do you make of it?

Jacotot's method was based on a rudimentary idea. Because the art of *Telemachus* was the product of a natural intelligence common to all humans, everything required to 'understand' it – everything required, that is, for the transmission of the writer's ideas to a reader's mind – is contained within the book itself. It doesn't require explanation from a third party such as an 'Old Master'; the artefact is able to speak for itself, and, with due attention, any student is able to understand it without aid.

Every *willing* student, says Jacotot, possesses the same inherent intelligence, and all are able to comprehend and learn from *things* in exactly the same manner he or she had learned to speak as a child, i.e. by an initially blind process of mimicking, repeating, correcting, and confirming in order to interact meaningfully with another human possessing the same fundamental intelligence.

A set of footprints on a beach constitute a language. Their shape is the same as your own feet, therefore they must be human. Their size and the distance between them relative to your own suggests that human's approximate size and age. Their placement reveals the direction they went, whether they were walking or running, and so on. Any such phenomenon can be taken as a starting point, which can automatically become a talking (or thinking) point; by talking (or thinking) you relate that thing to other things; and by relating to other things you gain insight. In Jacotot's words, 'The problem is to reveal an intelligence to itself. *Anything* can be used … a prayer or a song that the child or ignorant one

[1] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* [1987, French] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

knows by heart. There's always something the ignorant one knows that can be used as a point of comparison, something to which a new thing to be learned can be related.'[2]

These ideas became the foundation of what Jacotot called 'universal teaching', founded on the bedrock notion of equality as a presupposition rather than a goal. As such, both Jacotot's method and Rancière's resuscitation of it amount to a moral philosophical position, which is implicitly political as well as pedagogical. The 'Old Master' model of explication, Jacotot/Rancière argues, maintains the division between the supposedly 'wise' and the supposedly 'ignorant'. The new model, on the other hand, proposes emancipation – above all through the personal realization that one is *capable* of learning, and thereafter through the ability to teach oneself by contemplating the relations between observed facts. The emancipated human is simply conscious of the true power of the human mind, as opposed to the unconscious acceptance of received wisdom. And the only precondition of teaching another to be emancipated is to be emancipated oneself.

When the term 'emancipation' became equivocal, i.e. when it had lost any usefully specific common meaning, Jacotot simply discarded the term. He referred instead to his teachings as *panecastic* (= 'everything in each') and preferred to think of them as pragmatic 'stories' rather than high-flown philosophy. This chimes with one of the more affecting aspects of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* pointed out by translator Kristin Ross in her introduction to the English edition; namely, that Rancière consciously and consistently appropriates Jacotot's technique of *storytelling* by subtly confusing the source of the narrative voice to invoke rather a fundamentally anonymous, timeless, form of address.

Indeed, as the book goes on, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern who's 'speaking' exactly – Rancière or Jacotot? And this neatly embodies two of the book's main principles. First, by telling a story rather than writing an essay, the writer (whoever he is) puts himself on the level of the reader, or rather does away with levels altogether in order to recount his tale person-to-person rather than philosopher-to-student. Second, by confusing the voice's source, he defies the regular conception of accumulated, gradual history – which precisely mirrors his rejection of accumulated, gradual education. The impersonal, open-sourced paraphrase is congruent with notions of influence, passing on, continuation, movement. It's a form in which all are equal.

I recently attended a two-day conference devoted to Rancière's work.[3] To recap all the above in the terms that dominated this event: Rancière, speaking for and through Jacotot, posits a horizontal, egalitarian pedagogy against a vertical, hierarchical one. In the old, vertical model, authoritative masters typically *stultify* students by dispensing knowledge piecemeal, progressing step by step towards a complete intelligence. In Jacotot/Rancière's horizontal alternative, the 'ignorant' master emancipates by insisting that intelligence is the *precondition* of learning rather than its goal. Understood from this perspective, the student essentially teaches him- or herself; the 'master' merely creates the conditions for this to occur by providing articulate objects (a book, say, or some other aesthetic artefact) that will 'reveal an intelligence to itself'.

What struck me at the conference, though, was how the principles being espoused and debated were unwittingly enacted by the presentations themselves. It became harder and harder, in fact, to pay attention without reflexively evaluating to what extent the various speakers were acting in line with their subject, i.e. whether they were behaving like an explicating authority or a fellow ignorant. The social implications of Jacotot/Rancière's thinking were manifest, too, in the more mundane aspects of conference decorum: speakers overrunning their slots, panel discussions without discussion, obfuscating academic jargon, and other sundry opinions and mannerisms that seemed suddenly heightened either in accord or at odds with Jacotot/Rancière's lessons. The net effect was a kind of meta-conference as well as the ostensible one. All of which merely demonstrated the difficulty of putting principles into practice, even if you wholeheartedly adhere to them in theory. Regardless *and because of* this, the point remains: Rancière's writing is carefully contrived to prise the reader – or proselytizer – out of inertia and into action.

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Everything is in Everything*, Art Center College of Design, Los Angeles, 11–12 March, 2011.

The idea that a piece of work can 'teach a reader how to read it' implies an audience deepening their comprehension of a medium via the medium itself; that's to say, without external assistance. The most generic 'surrogate' form of assistance in the realm of art is the caption.[4] By 'self-captioning', then, I mean work that doesn't rely on the crutch of outside support, but patently *explicates itself*. Hence the connection between Jacotot/Ranciere's philosophy of articulate objects, and self-explanatory artworks (or other aesthetic projects).

Contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler considers the transformative effect of works of art on an audience in terms of 'individuation',[5] a form of self-realization whereby a reader is actively transformed by the experience of reading. (Stiegler usually talks in terms of books, but the same idea reasonably extends to any other art form.) The transformative effect of art is by no means inevitable – anything can be experienced without lasting effect or consequence. Moreover, as culture becomes dominated by technics and so increasingly, perniciously convenient (pre-digested, bite-sized, dumbed down), those truly transformative, individuating experiences are less and less frequent and less and less likely. These days, says Stiegler, we're more likely to read without *really* reading at all, without being significantly affected, because we lack due attention – and so, too, the art that fosters that attention.

Further, '*trans*individuation' refers to the transformation *between* individuals passed across generations via what he calls 'long circuits'. Multiple individuations occur during this broader process of cultural baton-passing. More precisely, transindividuation describes the dialectic between the two – the process by which personal and collective individuations transform one another over time. In Stiegler's view, this dialectic is the basis for all social transformation, yet our current cultural condition tends towards a contrary 'short circuit' thinking which is increasingly supplanting those essential long forms – the consequence of contemporary 'technics' that are both the cause and effect of diminishing attention spans. In other words, formerly long circuits are increasingly short-circuited, and the loss is pernicious and profound. Long circuits involve attachment to a rich span of collective knowledge, are constituent of a broader process of cultural transformation, and can therefore be considered more properly social *in the long run*.

A dearth of transindividuation effects attenuated social agency, hence Stiegler's call to recognize the importance of perpetuating long circuits. In the late 19th century, he explains by way of example, subscribers to the Paris Opera were sent the score and transcription of each upcoming recital, along with a commentary. As this was before the advent of sound recording, such extensive preparation was the only means of hearing or otherwise assimilating the music in advance of the event. Moreover, the majority of the bourgeois audience for such events at the time could typically play an instrument and read music themselves – not least because 'Being capable of playing music was a condition for listening to music'. Stiegler refers to this (after Bergson) as the loop stimulus: 'You can receive if you can give. If you can engage, you are also able to exit. If you are able to engage critically, then a process takes place that would otherwise remain static.'

In a conversation with journalist David Lipsky, David Foster Wallace states that one of his key aims as a writer is to make work that cultivates the degree of attention and involvement necessary for Stiegler's sense of individuation to occur.

> DFW: ... I think that if avant-garde stuff can do its job, it is tremendously difficult and not that accessible, and seduces the reader into making extraordinary efforts that he wouldn't normally make. And that's the kind of magic that really great art can do.
>
> DL: But the best thing is to show what TV can't, to use the ways books are better than TV.

[4] There are many others, though: the wall didactic, the press release, the information sheet, the catalogue essay, the walk-through – all of which could be reasonably thought of as 'captioning' the work, too.

[5] The term is drawn from the work of Gilbert Simondon. See: Bernard Stiegler, and Irit Rogoff, 'Transindividuation', *e-flux journal*, no. 14, March 2010, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/transindividuation. See also §4.9.

> DFW: Except of course the hard thing is to do both at the same time. Because a book has to teach a reader how to read it. So the structure stuff starts right at the beginning (...) We sit around and bitch about how TV has ruined the audience for reading – when all it's really done is given us the really precious gift of making our job harder. You know what I mean? And it seems to me like the harder it is to make a reader feel like it's worthwhile to read your stuff, the better a chance you've got of making real art. Because it's only real art that does that.
>
> DL: But as it gets more complex, a reader will feel they've wandered into a classroom where they missed the first few weeks of the course.
>
> DFW: You teach the reader that he's way smarter than he thought he was. I think one of the insidious lessons about TV is the meta-lesson that you're dumb. This is all you can do. This is easy, and you're the sort of person who really just wants to sit in a chair and have it easy. When in fact there are parts of us, in a way, that are a lot more ambitious than that. And what we need, I think (...) is seriously engaged art, that can teach again that we're smart.[6]

Wallace is suggesting that a book's structural 'lesson' should be productively difficult, and, crucially, taught by the text itself as opposed to some form of external commentary. In interviews he frequently claimed that his own goal was to transcend the polarization of highbrow meta-fiction (with its reputation for being academic and alienating) and lowbrow pop fiction (with its reputation for being approachable and anodyne) – that is, to balance technical sophistication with compulsive entertainment. Some 50 years on from Eco's Open Work poetics, Wallace's intentions are notably less ideological, or at least cut through with comparatively *personal* politics – for instance, overcoming solitude, boredom and addiction, exercising slow consideration in the face of high-speed media, or parsing the pros and cons of contemporary citizenship.

All of which is embodied in Wallace's major novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), a satire on entertainment and addiction in contemporary America, the plot of which hinges on a lethally entertaining samizdat video cartridge so addictive that it induces any unwitting viewer to watch it repeatedly until they expire. (A master copy of this literally mindless piece of entertainment is assimilated as a weapon and fought over by rival terrorist groups.) Wallace recounts having explicitly set himself the task of writing an ostensibly 'difficult' avant-garde novel that would be nonetheless compelling to read, thus mimicking the qualities of the plot's propelling device to the extent that the reader senses its effect.

True to his mandate, then, on one hand the novel is indeed compulsive reading and hugely entertaining – it satirizes a culture founded on instant gratification by performing it. On the other, it's *equally* hard to take due to its stop-start non-linear narrative, deluge of technical data, highly esoteric language, copious endnotes that contain essential plot information, and so on. By doing lowbrow *and* highbrow in equal measure, it ends up somewhere else altogether.[7]

Taking Wallace's ambition at face value, in what sense can we regard such a book as 'teaching a reader how to read it'? What's the so-called structural lesson that *Infinite Jest* means to convey?

[6] David Lipsky, ed., *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway, 2010), pp. 70–2.

[7] By contrast, Wallace's unfinished, posthumously published novel *The Pale King* is thematically rooted in contemporary notions of personal freedom and civic responsibility. Set in a major branch of the Inland Revenue Service, the narrative follows a number of employees whose work involves checking the validity of U.S. citizens' returns. Much of the subject matter is outwardly, palpably 'boring' – endless tax minutiae; accounts of the crushingly dull, repetitive workload; yet it's knowingly written a level out, a *parody* of tedious prose, and ultimately a portrayal of boredom that's paradoxically compelling.

In constantly balancing effort and entertainment, Wallace coaxes the reader into doing the increasingly involved work necessary to keep up with an increasingly convoluted (and hysterical) story. The reader is compelled to stay involved, despite herself. Duly addicted, and duly conscientious, she accepts the terms of this strenuous mental tennis, becomes attuned to the writing's considerable idiosyncrasy, and ends up a more robust reader for her trouble. Crucially, the novel is organized in such a way that the reader immediately understands the terms of this payoff, then gradually gleans how it duplicates the story's theme.

As such, *Infinite Jest* is a case of what Wallace's colleague Jonathan Franzen calls a 'contract' novel,[8] meaning one that knowingly and deliberately establishes a mutual exchange between author and reader on equal terms, and in doing so fosters an active rather than a passive reading (in line with Simondon and Stiegler's 'individuation'). Franzen contrasts 'contract' with 'status'. A status novel faces inward: the writer writes foremost for herself (or close colleagues) and the motivation is usually academic or solipsistic. A contract novel faces outwards: it seeks relationships.

In sum, a second-degree sense in which art can be considered 'social' is the extent to which it works to foster such connection, teaching its 'readers' to 'read' it – an active, self-motivating process. Jacotot and Rancière show us how any object can be read to educational and emancipatory ends. Stiegler suggests that, due to the ever-increasing convenience of culture, such self-realization is becoming less and less common, and its reactivation all the more urgent. And Wallace elaborates his own personal poetics in this direction: the attempt to make people realize or remember the extent of their own intelligence. In a short memoir on the filming of what became Deleuze's *L'Abécédaire*, the French TV director Pierre-André Boutang recalls how the series seemed to foster precisely this quality:

> There are shoots where the technicians slack off ... Here, they were listening, they were interested. Like everyone else, they felt very intelligent. There are a lot of people who feel very intelligent in front of the *Abécédaire*. That's one of its great qualities. When it came out on tape, people stopped me on the streets to tell me they listened to it a little every morning when they woke up.[9]

## 7.2: MODERNISM AS A TOOL

In *Modern Typography*, Robin Kinross writes:

> The thought that accompanies making need not issue as printed or written words, nor even as speech, but it may still be traced in the product. In this way products can themselves be 'articulate', though their makers may not have spoken.[10]

*Modern Typography* in general is an argument for a 'critically reflective practice', and Kinross duly begins by reflecting critically on the conventions of his own practice, design history. It is conceived as an essay in the most literal sense[11] – as a searching, speculative *attempt* to reconsider how the field is conceived from scratch. He contends that a discipline turns truly 'modern' only when it becomes properly self-aware and reflective, marked by the spread of knowledge about its own technologies and techniques. From this perspective, typography turns modern (comes of age, matures) not with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press circa 1450, but on the occasion of the first book to document its own production processes, spreading knowledge of the formerly clandestine 'Black Art'

[8] Jonathan Franzen, 'Mr Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books', *The New Yorker*, 30 September, 2002.

[9] Pierre-André Boutang, 'L'Abécédaire', *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #3, 2002, pp. 4–5.

[10] Kinross, *Modern Typography*, op. cit., p. 13.

[11] See §1.3.

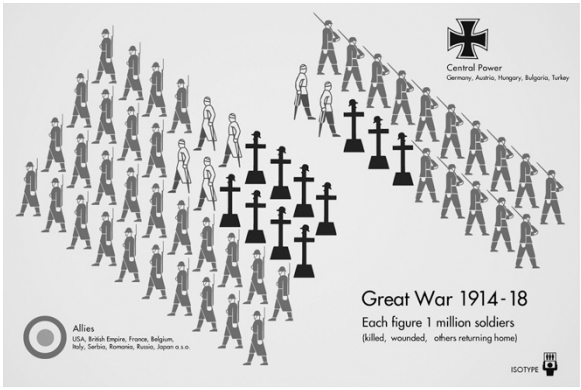
and inaugurating a chain of criticality, improvement and progress. The case in point is Joseph Moxon's treatise *Mechanick Exercises*, printed some 250 years after Gutenberg.[12]

Kinross writes, however, that 'modernist' tropes in the field of typography are more typically considered to be the result of 'artists blundering into the quiet preserves of book printing (…) violating the wisdom of tradition and convention'.[13] As in other domains, those tropes involve the reduction to elemental 'universal' forms (circle, triangle and square; primary colours) and dynamic asymmetry (directing viewing by organizing the relative weight of those elements). Against the usual before/after conception of 'modern', he aims to show rather that 'there are modern elements in what has been regarded as traditional, and … a tradition behind what has been taken to be just "modernist".'[14] In other words, he highlights the spirit, approach or attitude that *prefigures* outcome. From this angle it's possible to see more similarities than differences between, say, the Arts and Crafts movement and the Bauhaus: universal forms, standardization, economy of means, and a socially-oriented poetics.

One cause of such blunt traditional/modern polarization, he argues, is a fundamental misconception of the word 'design':

> This may appear odd to those who assume that the design is the product. That is a view superficial in the literal as well as metaphorical sense of the word, and which ends in equating design with ornament. In this essay, 'design' is understood not as a noun but as a verb: an activity and a process. And, in this light, ideas become as real as inked sheets or paper.[15]

Kinross anticipates and defuses the objection that this emphasis on ideas 'gives undue prominence to the articulate', to those examples which have managed to survive and pass on these ideas. In fact, he turns the objection on its head: it's precisely *because* of being unusually articulate – which requires an unusual degree of engagement and investment – that such work survives to carry on communicating in meaningful ways. In which case, he gives *due* prominence to the articulate. A recurring example in Kinross's writing is the work of the Isotype group who, working from Vienna around the middle of the 20th century, developed a graphic language to render unusually clear charts of social statistics. The real legacy of Isotype, he asserts, is the intense intelligence compressed into these charts – elements configured according to meaning, often counter-intuitively, and without any recourse to precedent.




The term 'articulate object' crops up in a published discussion between Kinross and his colleague Richard Hollis on the problems involved in writing about the history of design, such as the vague

[12] See also §3.5.

[13] Kinross, *Modern Typography*, op. cit., p. 11.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 12.

boundaries of the domain, the daunting scope of material, and – again – the absence of obvious precedents.[16] The premise for this discussion was a design history book Hollis was working on at the time,[17] and his thoughts seem particularly potent for having taken place during this process, while the book's character was still plastic and so susceptible to change.

Their talk is full of digressions and diversions that likewise reflect aspects of Hollis's way of working on the book. For instance, where more regular design history books tend to regurgitate canonical examples rescanned from increasingly degraded reproductions in previous ones, Hollis is guided by the availability of actual sources able to be studied first-hand (whether conveniently archived, or otherwise available and affordable). The relative scarcity of historical material is part and parcel of compiling a survey of graphic design rather than art: although its artefacts tend to have been produced in greater numbers, they are also generally more ephemeral. But these positive 'limitations' are acknowledged from the outset, which also sets the tone of the interview: pragmatic, anecdotal and specific.

Kinross begins with a friendly provocation, asking Hollis – at that point mainly a practising designer[18] – what he thinks he's doing writing a history, i.e. trespassing on a foreign profession. As Hollis doesn't really offer an answer, Kinross provides his own. Characteristic of Hollis's writing on design, he says, is the rigorous description of the technical processes behind the works; and that this is consonant with his practical work inasmuch as it similarly 'exploits process'. Hollis says this is more the consequence of 'not being a professional writer', and so of time spent 'struggling to find a way of saying something'. That sounds a very pragmatic approach, replies Kinross; a good way to avoid lapsing into clichés.

The majority of work they discuss from Hollis's book-in-progress dates from the decades of 'heroic' modernism (broadly speaking, between the wars). The best work of this period, says Kinross, is loaded with didactic potential, to the extent that modernism might now most usefully be considered a body of knowledge about 'ways to do things' manifest in the most articulate products of the time.

More specifically, the examples that particularly lend themselves to Hollis's technical storytelling, he suggests, are those that *visibly allude to their own production processes* and so demonstrate how the thinking behind a piece of work works in tandem with the technology used to realize it. The conscientious observer is then able to perceive not only the end result, but also what it took get there – a synthesis of rational thinking and attendant technology. Certain work amounts to a kind of key, he says – and 'once you've got the key, you can unlock something pretty instantly'.

The particular qualities common to the work in his history are 'finesse' and 'conviction', says Hollis – and that his main task is to deduce and explain what the processes evident in the work meant at the time as opposed to how they might come across in retrospect; first in terms of how commonplace or counterintuitive the thinking would have been, then how easy/difficult and cheap/expensive it would have been to achieve it. Obviously, most of his examples were made using far more mechanical processes than today's equivalents. Those didactic traces of production processes are accordingly far less tangible in their contemporary digital counterparts, the workings of which tend to be relatively hidden, if not entirely obscure.

Finally, they note that most of this 'heroic' work was typically made in relatively local, specific circumstances before the advent of marketing departments, public relations or focus groups, and so far more likely to channel the focused intelligence of a single person at work. Today it's far more likely deflected and compromised.

[16] Robin Kinross and Richard Hollis, 'Conversation with Richard Hollis on Graphic Design History', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1992, pp. 73–90.

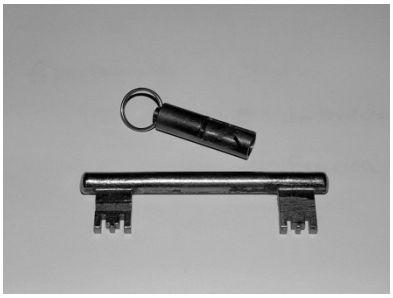
[17] Published two years later: Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: a Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994).

[18] See §9.3.

## 7.3: READING THINGS

Let's examine a little further what it means to 'read' an articulate object. Here are three examples from the domains of sociology, art, and design.

Bruno Latour's essay 'The Berlin Key' is an instructive case study from social science: an account of an eccentric door key native to certain residential blocks on the outskirts of West Berlin.[19] Oddly, the key is symmetrical, with two 'heads' and no 'handle' at opposite ends of a regular shaft – or maybe two handles in the shapes of heads. Latour means to show how a complex series of events can be deduced from inanimate objects, hence the subtitle 'How to do Words with Things' (a neat inversion of the title of a well-known book).



Latour imagines himself into the shoes of a 'careful archaeologist' trying to comprehend the Berlin Key's particular purpose. She wants to know both how it works and why it was designed that way, and the deduction works both ways; that's to say, thinking through the key's possible social function can reveal how it works technically – and vice versa. As a proponent of 'object-oriented philosophy' this is Latour's point: there's no distinction between so-called 'subjective' social forces and so-called 'objective' products. Each is a complex 'assembly of issues', which is the etymological root of the word 'thing'. The essence of a thing therefore consists in its connections and relations. With this in mind, Latour caricatures the contrary tunnel vision of discrete disciplines like sociology or anthropology by making his Berlin archaeologist a bit of a hapless character.

Logical reasoning gets her nowhere, but she finally figures it out through protracted trial-and-error. It turns out that they key is used to control the comings and goings of residents in a communal building according to the hour. During the day, a resident can insert their key on the outside and unlock the door – but then can't pull it out on the same side without relocking it. Because of the symmetry, however, it can be pushed *through* the keyhole and retrieved after locking the door again from the inside. The ingenious crux of this double agency is a simple notch cut into one side of the key that slips into a lip inside the lock.

The situation is further complicated at night when, at a certain hour, the building's concierge adjusts the mechanism's setting with his own unique skeleton key – thinner and minus the one-way notch – to prevent anyone locking or unlocking until morning again. Latour's summary point is that, with due attention and a lack of preconceptions, the riddle of the key's utility is inscribed into – and reasonably deduced from – the thing itself. The inanimate object betrays its communal, social purpose.

One commensurate example of a 'readable thing' in contemporary art – an *articulate assembly of issues* – is Alighiero e Boetti's series *Mappa* ('Map'), around 150 of which were produced in cycles from 1971
until his death in 1994. In a pre-emptive piece titled *Political Planisphere* (1969), Boetti coloured the flags of the world's nation states within their respective borders on a large wall map in felt-tip pen. Thereafter,
he supplied (mostly) groups of Afghan women with an outline template of a world map and commissioned them to embroider the flags the same manner. Boetti always used up-to-date maps, so

[19] Bruno Latour, 'The Berlin Key or How to do Words with Things' [1990] in P.M. Graves-Brown, ed., *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

each new piece bears witness to the historical moment of its production – which was a relatively long moment, given that each map typically took up to four artisans about a year to make.[20]



Seen as a series, then, the gradual reconfiguration of national borders records the flux of geopolitical relations, sometimes even giving rise to new flags. Afghanistan's own flag was frequently contested during this period, and Boetti always let the artisans decide how to colour the country at any given moment; in one map from 1983 it is even left blank. Production was suspended for a number of years in the wake of the 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and several unfinished *Mappa* hidden away. When they were recovered some years later, Boetti left these 'war victims' unfinished in testimony to the events. He never returned to the country after the coup, but continued to oversee the production of more maps in Afghanistan, as well as in neighboring Pakistan where many families had fled.

At the material level, the fact that the *Mappa* were handmade meant that personal aesthetic preferences (such as the choice of incidental colours) and techniques (such as the length and direction of stitching) became prominent aspects of the work, along with other incidental factors (such as the availability of yarn). Boetti also assimilated happenstance 'mistakes', preferring to accentuate rather than level out the differences between the works. For instance, on receiving one with the oceans stitched pink rather than blue, he encouraged further 'discoloured' versions. Most of the works are framed by a statement, stitched in Boetti's signature square alphabet along with the rest of the canvas in a variety of languages. Some are informative, noting such as the time and place of production along, while others are completely cryptic, and a few even composed by the artisans themselves.

Though outsourcing material production is commonplace in art today, Boetti's hands-off 'directorial' role in the whole process was prescient: 'I did nothing, chose nothing, in the sense that: the world is made as it is, not as I designed it, the flags are those that exist, and I did not design them.'[21] The work is fundamentally based on a single, simple idea, yet the nucleus of this idea altered over time as one map became several maps, and several maps a series; each new advance brought about new implications. By outsourcing the work, Boetti wasn't out to omit his own signature and emphasize industrial production, as was the impetus behind such as Laszlo Moholy Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* (five formats of an identical same abstract composition in enamel paint that he supposedly ordered by phone[22]). Instead, the ostensibly 'same' maps register the differences inevitably imposed by manual labour and the passage of time.

Art critic Luca Cerizza has described Boetti's work in Homeric terms of a tension between contrasting but complementary 'Ulysses' and 'Penelope' modes – the 'adventure' of Ulysses tempered by the 'patience' of Penelope. In other words, the *Mappa* consist in the rift between a *eureka!* moment of

[20] See: Luca Cerizza, *Alighiero e Boetti: Mappa* (London: Afterall books, 2008).

[21] Alighiero e Boetti quoted in: Alberto Boatto, *Alighiero & Boetti* (Ravenna: Essegi, 1984), p. 122.

[22] More on this in the middle of §6.3.

inspiration and the slow-burn complexity of its steady realization: a ‘one-liner’ work with an unexpectedly rich payoff. Even the fact that the flags can be readily *un*stitched seems a simultaneously insipid *and* profound allusion to the tentative state of global relations.

Like Latour’s key, all these aspects and more can be reasonably read from the artefact (which isn’t to say a bit of elucidation and backstory doesn’t help). Like a shaggy dog story, this accumulated reading amounts to another sense of the work altogether – it undergoes a change in kind, more story than dog.[23]

My third example is far more prosaic. Norman Potter called himself a ‘cabinet-maker’, but he was actually an accomplished polymath – a designer in the broadest sense, as well as a teacher, writer, poet and ‘out-and-out modernist’. In terms of practical design work, he specialized in small-scale interior architecture and furniture. His second book, *Models & Constructs*, is an autobiographical account of this work, and of his life in the margins of design culture.

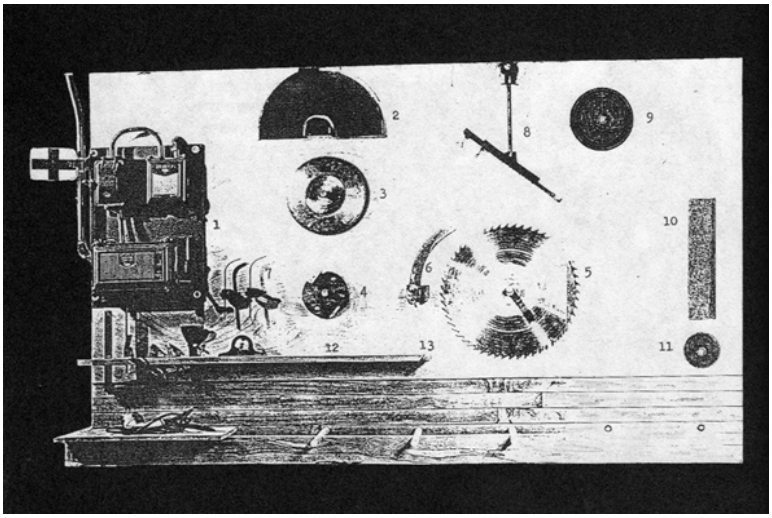
Much of the book recounts his conceiving, establishing and running a local, resolutely independent workshop set up to take on miscellaneous architectural projects. The book’s opening section is based on a talk given to carpentry students on the subject of ‘Universals & particulars’, in which Potter recounts his thinking through the layout of what on the face of it appears to be an unremarkable toolrack he designed to accompany a woodcutting machine at the heart of his workshop. This, he suggests, will offer ‘an excellent transition from theory to practice’, its configuration being a remarkably considered amalgamation of several competing factors of display, accessibility and safety. Located in the midst of a potentially chaotic and dangerous space, the stakes are high: ‘Everything must come to hand in the right sequence, without fuss or confusion.’ He writes:

> Perhaps you are wondering why a toolrack should be taken so seriously. Surely it needs no more ‘designing’ than comes naturally with a bit of common sense? Well of course design *is* that; perhaps a little more; but it is certainly an everyday activity responding to everyday demands. Design for Sundays is always suspect, like Christianity with a similar fixation. It is usually over-dressed, weak in the head, and too easily sold on appearances.[24]

Potter cycles through the reasoning behind his tool rack’s layout, which, he says, ‘provides a visual equivalent, in the form of a graphic diagram, to the way the machine works.’ This diagrammatic aspect of the rack is emphasized by the book’s image of it, a photocopy of a photograph in which the objects are usefully degraded into crude abstract shapes on the board’s white ground, then numbered according to a key in the margin.

[23] Here are two more instances. First, in the earlier years the women who worked on Boetti’s maps often didn’t comprehend the images they were embroidering, as they had little or no knowledge of world geography, the schematic representation of space, or the graphic language of national flags – and so the works were quite literally didactic in the sense of educating the workers. Then, after Boetti’s death, some of the artisanal circles who worked on Boetti’s maps continued to make work in a similar idiom, but now to commercial ends – the most notorious being rugs depicting the two planes about to hit the twin towers with the date and event commemorated in text written into the image.

[24] Potter, *Models & Constructs*, op. cit., p. 23.




The rack is primarily configured according to a simple Cartesian grid: tools used for with-the-grain cutting on the horizontal axis, those for cross-grain on the vertical, and those for both at the intersection. Within this grid, specific parts are placed according to their relative size, function, frequency of use, and interrelations. A further organizing principle is to hang those most frequently used on the left end nearest the machine, with less frequent 'spares and specials' petering out towards the right. Certain groups of items have their own internal alignments, like the descending circles of parts 2, 3 and 4; or the deliberate exclamation mark made by parts 10 and 11 at the board's far end. Similar pragmatics determine the 'exceptional' position of the flag that sticks off the board's main ground at top left to announce a first-aid box, and the shallow shelf for temporary items underneath it. Potter calls it all a 'ghostly dance of conceptual reference'.

Inasmuch as all this formal reasoning can be extrapolated from its surface, the rack is another exemplary instance of an emphatically articulate product – one that Potter says integrally 'points up' rather than superfluously 'arts up' its internal relations. He's careful to acknowledge, too, that contrary to the sort of logical 'crossword puzzle' this sounds like in retrospective telling, the actual practice of realizing something so apparently obvious is usually far more akin to a haphazard game of 'snakes and ladders', i.e. not straightforward at all.

In an interview, Kinross recalls that during the preparation of *Modern Typography*, Potter pushed him to design the book himself, because doing so could and should be an embodiment of its thesis. 'He said something like: "You have to publish it yourself. That's part of the content."' And then: 'He thought that the book itself should be a kind of demonstration: an existential acting-out … It's an exaggeration, but publishing the book myself was a kind of validation of what I was arguing.'[25]

Potter had already done as much with his own first book, *What is a designer* – and also elucidated the reasons. Towards the end of the chapter 'Questioning Design', he anticipates a reader wondering why his book is bereft of images and compiles a list of answers that ends on the assertion that 'the form of the book should be at one with its message.' [26] In *Models & Constructs*, Potter claims that this sort of answerability – the willingness to explain how and why particular choices have been made – is 'historically and ideologically rooted in the evolution of what is now being called "modernism" and a little earlier, "the modern movement".'[27] And at the end of the toolrack chapter he writes:

> There is a certain sense in which we are wholly involved in metaphor and in which a small construct such as this – local to its context and

[25] Stuart Bailey and Robin Kinross, 'Questions without question marks', *Dot Dot Dot* #14, 2007, p. 9.

[26] Potter, *What is a designer*, op. cit., p. 159.

[27] Potter, *Models & Constructs*, op. cit., pp. 34–5.

> wholly a one-off – may show some value also as a model, which will then be a mode of address, of attitude and approach, rather than outcome or consequence.

Then:

> I hope however that by veering so alarmingly between the general and the particular, and between the realms of metaphor and practicality I have suggested to you that every technical possibility has a wider equivalence, and a positive need to seek relationship with its neighbours.[28]

## 7.4: SPEAK FOR YOURSELVES: TWO EXHIBITIONS

I recently came across a couple of demonstrations of what I've been referring to as 'self captioning' sustained across a whole show rather than compressed into a single piece of work. This may sound contradictory, inasmuch as I've been arguing so far for markedly *self-contained works* that *speak for themselves* rather than rely on the help of, say, third party press releases, wall texts, articles, essays or catalogues. However, I mean to refer here to the sort of exhibition *emphatically* intended to amount to a whole greater than its parts, specifically by means of what artist Joseph Grigley calls 'exhibition prosthetics'.[29] He means those ostensibly supplementary conventions we think of as existing on the margins and fringes of the 'actual' work (such as the formats listed above), only treated in such a way as to become an intrinsic part of the art, not merely an extension of it.

According to the original gestalt theorists, the term 'gestalt' properly refers not to a whole greater than the sum of its parts as is commonly conceived, but one essentially *different* from the sum of its parts, i.e. a whole new entity, a whole new part, in itself. Likewise, here I mean something markedly more concerted than any old exhibition's banal claim to coherence (on the premise of, say, bringing a bunch of essentially-discrete-yet-somehow-related artworks together in the same space); something more akin to a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Like the examples of work by Aurélien Froment, Gerard Byrne and Frances Stark referred to in §5.8, I mean a total work of art that articulates itself in an appropriately 'off' manner.

In *Exhibition Prosthetics*, Grigley refers to the obvious sense of prosthesis as a useful attachment or extension to a body – in this case the 'body' of an exhibition. He wonders where an exhibition begins or ends, and asks 'What is, and what could be, the nature of the relationship between exhibition practices and publication practices?' He elucidates with a story about a label headed '*Edison's last breath?*', notably contained *within* a vitrine at the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan, adjacent a test tube that possibly contained or contains what the caption claims. 'What is compelling to me', says Grigley,

> is not whether the story is true or not, but that the story exists as it does narrated within the vitrine. If exhibitions involve showing, they also [can] involve a process by which the act of showing is subsumed by the act of telling – of constructing narratives that elide distinctions between words and images, or between artifacts and artifictions.[30]

Grigley suggests his interest in the role of such supplementary forms is partly a consequence of his deafness since age 10. This realignment of the sensory world, he says, provokes further questions like

[28] Ibid., p. 35.

[29] Joseph Grigley, *Exhibition Prosthetics* (London: Bedford Press, 2010).

[30] Grigley, op. cit., p. 6.

'What does the world look like with the sound turned off' and 'How might it be that language can be said to capture human experience?'[31] In this light, exhibition prosthetics map the implications of 'the disjunction between visual and auditory experiences'. A prosthesis, he says, necessarily becomes a part of the body it extends and supplements, and so is something more than just a fine art equivalent of Gérard Genette's literary concept of the paratext (those textual forms that exist *alongside* a main text: footnote, title page, critical essay, etc.). A prosthetic is, rather, *assimilated* into the main body; it turns constituent. According to Grigley, 'belonging' is the perfect word to describe this relationship between body and prosthetic. It is dialogic – each informing and supplementing the other, or in terms of exhibiting, showing and telling. Exhibitions, he concludes, tend towards the bad habit of saying too much, and this is particularly the case of the labels, captions and wall texts that characterize contemporary practice, and which present themselves as 'disinterested authorities'.

By contrast, the first exhibition I have in mind is Mark Manders' 2012 *Parallel Occurrences / Documented Assignments* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles,[32] a sequence of ten or so rooms sparsely populated with installations and sculptures. These were combinations of Arte Povera-inflected materials (untreated wood, metal, plaster), quotidian items (teabags, cups, office furniture) and surreal inventions (obscure plumbing, sleeping clay animals) – all typical enough for one of the ongoing series of Manders' shows under the rubric *Self-Portrait as a Building*.[33]

More surprising, however, were a series of concise remarks that annotated the work throughout. Although set on regular caption cards, they were totally at odds with the museum's usual didactics, written in a distinctly oblique but by no means obtuse voice. Written in the first person, Manders had clearly written the captions himself. Also, all the captions were contained in quotation marks; this is perhaps because they were actually drawn from a previous publication, but they served also to emphasize a weird intimacy entirely in keeping with their objects – a sense of being spoken casually yet seriously.



This delicate assemblage, *Shadow Study* (2010), for instance, was accompanied by the following statement:

> 'If you think about the evolution of cups, it's just a beautiful evolution. The first cups were human hands: folded together, they took the water out of the river. The next cups were made from things like

[31] Ibid., pp. 26–7.

[32] *Mark Manders: Parallel Occurrences / Documented Assignments*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 25 September, 2010 – 2 January, 2011.

[33] *Self-portrait as a building* is an evolving series of architectural plans begun in 1996. The work is conceived as a fictional building that represents a fictional artist, 'Mark Manders', an alter-ego distinct from the artist Mark Manders.

hollowed pieces of wood or folded leaves, and so on. The last beautiful moment in the history of the cup was when it got a handle. After that, nothing really interesting happened with cups, just small variations, mainly ornamental. Many generations worked on it, and now you can say that the cup is finished in terms of evolution.

A few times a day there is a cup very close to my upper leg bone, and I slowly discovered that if you turn an empty cup upside down there is a shadow falling out of the cup, falling upon my leg. I wanted to keep this shadow, have it and own it, so I turned it into an image.'




On another wall, *Perspective Study* (2010), a sculpture-of-sorts apparently assembled from some of Manders's previous printed works (plus some uncanny foreshortening), was accompanied by this terse statement:

'Since the Renaissance, every artist should make at least one perspective study. This one is made with fake newspapers.'

As these two examples suggest, the labels vary in length from piece to piece: point made, note stops. The key quality of this writing is it's sharp sense of pace; beyond that, without the levelling effect of a regular tone or template, they read as if written for *this* particular arrangement of *these* particular pieces, with just enough commentary to tip an audience towards a take on the work without spoiling the enigma. In this manner they quietly assert themselves as counterpart to the works they supposedly underscore, which further implies that the artworks effectively illustrate the texts to the same degree that the texts caption the artworks: a reversible means of perceiving the work without pinning it down.

The thread that runs through these labels, these 'pointers', recalls George Kubler's thesis in *The Shape of Time*, in which he relates how the same iconic forms recur throughout history in different styles and materials at different times and places. The first room of Manders' show contains a plinth with a single sculpture, *Obtrusive Head* (2010), a vertical sliver of a giant plaster cast of a Greek head clamped together with chunks of wood, like a row of book spines. The attendant text reads:

'I made this work early in 2010. It really should have been made in the 1920s, but I simply was not alive at that time.

It is a composition with verticals that form one harmonious musical chord, and it covers a small gap in art history.'

And this in turn seems to be a model or cousin of a larger version of the same motif made with similar materials only now constituent of more complete furniture that appears later in the show with an entirely different but equally prosaic title (*Still Life with Books, Table, and Fake Newspaper* (2010))

and an equally flippant label – both deceptively throwaway and therefore entirely in character with the rest of the show:

> 'If you are in a room with two books, a table, some clay, some pieces of wood, and a newspaper, this is one of the things you can make and place in front of you.'

The second illuminating instance I happened across was an installation by Paul Elliman as part of a 2012 group exhibition of historical and contemporary works that explored 'the material qualities of written and spoken language'.[34] The conceptual and physical locus of the show, Elliman's main contribution was a tableau presentation of his *Found Fount* – an ongoing, accumulating 'material alphabet' made of found objects and fragments collected since 1989. He elliptically describes it as 'a system for describing the world using the world itself'.[35]

Elliman regularly employs this expansive, ever-expanding and potentially infinite character set to practical and poetic ends, its bits typically assembled into gnomic and often self-referential statements (e.g. 'I will work at your destruction') in publications, prints and photograms, and on posters. Half a century old, the majority of the collection has never been applied in this way, nor will it necessarily be in the future, and this ambiguity is key. Assembling a potential alphabet by persistently repurposing detritus as letters is a reminder that the Roman alphabet is essentially redundant, in the sense that its component forms are arbitrary, modular and non-figurative, as opposed to, say, Chinese ideograms. Flickering between object, shape and character, the project makes language strange again, a permanent *verfremdungseffekt*.

The rogue collection is bounded by a few basic parameters. First, the materials must be man-made, thereby carrying the trace of a means of manufacture conflating the construction of language with the construction of the built environment. Second, its elements must be small enough to fit in a human mouth or be passed from hand to hand. Third, no character form may be 'applied' – i.e. used as an element in an artwork or piece of graphic design – more than once.



At MoMA, the collection was emphatically shown *as* a collection – sorted into discrete categories, set out in archive boxes, some under plexiglass, and clearly labelled. Each label comprised an allusive title, minimal description and list of materials, playfully arranged by Elliman into curt prose poems that are, rhetorically speaking, all over the place – variously offhand, formal, straightforward or abstruse (sometimes all on the same card). They generally describe each new category's 'found' context by either alluding to some specific backstory or implying some future linguistic use, loosely grouped into

[34] *Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language*, MoMA, New York, 6 May – 27 August, 2012.

[35] http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/ecstaticalphabets/works/elliman-scissors/

several species according to type (keys, scissor handles, shims), material (cardboard, processed ferrite oxide), aesthetic properties (colour, transparency) or location (often with particular industrial resonance: Birkenhead, Detroit, Cupertino, etc.). Like the texts in the Mark Manders show, they are unusually generous yet anything but bland – extending a hand to a viewer, pointing to the work and unobtrusively colouring it.

Some refer to a specific social backstory:

> *The Battle of Waterloo*, 1998–, Die-cut cardboard shapes; ongoing accumulation. 'The Battle of Waterloo' refers to a homeless persons' encampment at Waterloo Station in London. Called Cardboard City, it was forcibly removed in 1998 in order to build an IMAX theater.
>
> *Brushes, a.k.a THE CROSSING SWEEPER* (from the series *Magic in Modern London*), 1993–, Broken steel blades; ongoing accumulation. These objects can be used as dashes, slashes, or underscores, but for me they have a more abstract relationship to language that doesn't necessarily tie them to a specific typographic mark. At first I didn't know what they were. It took a while to figure out that they were elements of the metal brushes that sweep the streets of London.

Others focus on their alphabetic potential:

> *Dead Scissors*, 2004–, Scissors handles: processed metals and plastic, digital print; ongoing accumulation. Several characters can be interpreted from these forms, including lowercase d's, b's, p's, a capital Q and P, and a 6 and 9.
>
> *Wild Asters*, 1996–, Paste jewelry: rhinestone, lucite, glass, plastic, pewter, silver, nickel, brass, and other materials; ongoing accumulation. The print is a production drawing for a set of typographical asterisks.

Plus a couple from the more oblique, suggestive end of the spectrum:

> *Endgame*, 1997–, Cork, felt, HDPE, wood, rubber, and cardboard game board; ongoing accumulation. These tops and stops are pieces for a board game in which the only rule is to bring the game to a close as quickly as possible. They could be rendered in drawings and used for punctuation as periods.
>
> *Black Spot* (from the series *Magic in Modern London*), Black stone; ongoing accumulation.

Finally, Elliman's labels – again like those of Manders – are deliberately inconsistent; a series of individual inferences attained by anecdotal means as various and scattered as the *Fount* itself, each with its own character. The elliptical aspect of Elliman's writing ('A system for describing the world using the world itself') is integral: a multifarious, conspicuously open language that mirrors a multifarious, conspicuously open collection of material. In this way, the captions reflect (duplicate, multiply) the collection. They are simultaneously a product and demonstration of the things they describe, subject and object. As such, it's hard to imagine either of these exhibitions having the potency without their allusive labels. (Incidentally, 'allude' comes from the Latin *alludere*, which means 'to play beside'.)

## 7.5: LOWER-CASE ETHICS

The other day I came across an odd little piece by the writer Martin Amis. It was a short tribute to the unorthodox manners of his outspoken friend and colleague Christopher Hitchens. Amis recalls a few everyday instances of what he calls Hitchens's 'spontaneous eloquence' – in a restaurant, hailing a cab, and so on. Though Hitchens frequently comes off as a petulant and obstreperous in public, he says, in actual fact he's invariably practising *root level good manners* in the face of conventional etiquette – a kind of principled rudeness. What particularly impresses Amis is how his friend's contentious remarks and retorts are so immediate, so fully formed; and this frank, unfiltered quality, he goes on, carries over into his friend's writing. Basically, there's no distinction between his social character and the character of his work: what you get is what you see. Amis elaborates:

> Art is freedom; and in art, as in life, there is no freedom without law. The foundational literary principle is decorum, which means something like the opposite of its dictionary definition: 'behaviour in keeping with good taste and propriety' (i.e. submission to an ovine consensus). In literature, decorum means *the concurrence of style and content – together with a third element, which I can only vaguely express as earning the right weight*. It doesn't matter what the style is, and it doesn't matter what the content is; but the two must concur.[36]

This rebel decorum – *the opposite of its dictionary definition* – is, broadly speaking, what I mean to elaborate in these next sections. By which I don't mean to invoke some debased, tediously glamorous sense of 'rebellion' (i.e. contrarian for the sake of being petulant, or vice versa), more a modest state of independence that involves operating outside the sanctions of others, yet with a deep sense of personal responsibility. 'Christopher's everyday manners are beautiful (and wholly democratic)' says Amis, 'because he knows that in manners begins morality. But each case is dealt with exclusively on its merits.'[37]

Amis's tribute applies precisely to the work described in the following talk. It was presented at Museum Sztuki in Lodz, Poland, on December 11, 2012, where it was intended to serve as a trailer for a rare retrospective of the Polish couple Stefan and Franciszka Themersons the following season:[38]

Tonight I'm going to focus specifically on Stefan's work, though to cleave the couple's work apart is generally misleading. He was a polymathic man of letters – in no particular order, a poet, artist, novelist, essayist and philosopher. She was a similarly peripatetic graphic artist who made drawings and paintings, but also worked in theatre, exhibition, and graphic design. Her pictures often accompanied his writing, but only to the extent that his writing accompanied her pictures. Otherwise put, they made profoundly mutual work together.

In Warsaw in the 1930s, they made a number of popular children's books, as well as five avant-garde films before migrating first to Paris, then on to London during the war, where they remained for the rest of their lives – until 1988. They founded the fiercely independent Gaberbocchus Press in 1948 in order to publish their own work as well as that of like minds past and present, from Aesop and Alfred Jarry to Bertrand Russell and Raymond Queneau. For a couple of years from 1957, they also hosted an avant-garde literary den in their basement called the Common Room. So together they were also film-makers, publishers, and catalysts.

To avoid confusion, from now my 'Themerson' will be shorthand for Stefan alone. I meant to do the whole thing using his Christian name, but recoil at the improper intimacy this suggests (the way some

[36] Martin Amis, 'He's one of the most terrifying rhetoricians the world has seen', *The Observer*, 24 April, 2011. My italics.

[37] Ibid.

[38] *The Themersons and the Avant-Garde*, Museum Sztuki, Lodz, Poland, 22 February – 5 May, 2013.

people refer to Warhol as ‘Andy’). I’m certain he would have disapproved too. For the time being, then, with no disrespect to Franciszka, Themerson refers exclusively to male of the species.

Specifically, I want to focus on Themerson’s ethics. I could maybe substitute ‘ethics’ with ‘politics’ or ‘social commitment’, but have to admit I don’t have enough of a grip on any of these terms to say for sure. What I *can* say for sure – because he said it – is that Themerson wasn’t interested in capital-E Ethics, by which he meant the academic discipline, only in lower-case-e ethical phenomena; that is, ethics as actually lived rather than abstractly theorized. Such was the crux of his work.

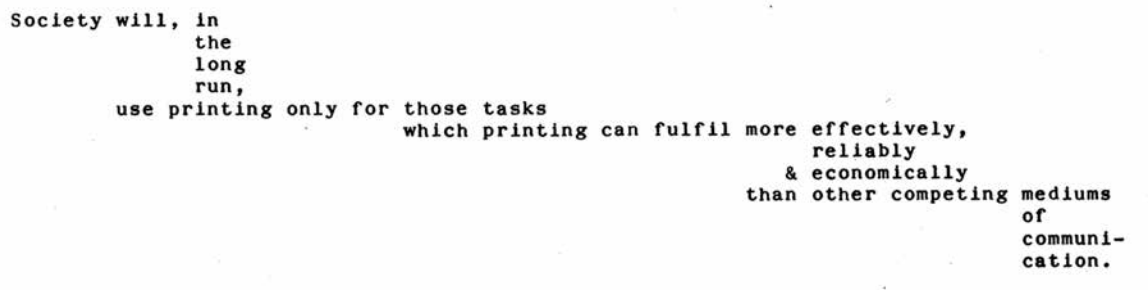
He was a steadfast pragmatist then – as long as you hear that as a common not a proper noun too, which is to say, nothing particularly to do with capital-P Pragmatist philosophy, nor for that matter with that eponymous brand of politics we’ve come to know since. In fact, if anything, you might say he was a *lower-case-ist* through and through. To quite literally perpetuate this line of thinking, I want to look at how this ethical orientation is manifest in his work. I don’t just mean how he explicated his approach to living in his writing, whether in his own talks and essays, or as channelled through his fictional or semi-fictional protagonists – where it’s always obvious enough; I mean to examine how this attitude comes across in less patent, more subterranean ways.

This *attitude manifest* amounts to what Walter Benjamin called ‘political tendency’. In 1936, Benjamin called for writers – and by implication artists generally – to further the cause of social and political progress not by merely writing to align themselves with one ideology or another, supporting a cause and thereby likely preaching to the converted, but by tinkering with and possibly subverting the root-level workings of their field. He wanted writers and artists to focus not merely on *what* they were writing and making and disseminating, but at least as much on *how* they were doing it.

By *implicating* themselves in this way, Benjamin said, writers could usefully work things out in public – a ‘working out’ that both *carries* the work (propels it) and *is carried in the form of* the work (is reflected in it). For instance, a writer might observe that writing a certain kind of journal essay or a pamphlet is, to all intents and purpose, irrelevant or impotent, and so resolve to seek newly charged ways of writing and dispersing, of *communicating-at-large* – considering from scratch what they have to offer in view of the whole ecology of publishing, both within and beyond its conventions. Through this process of reflection and action, says Benjamin, the work will then *inevitably* manifest a political tendency. The writer doesn’t merely choose sides, left or right, but *forges ahead* by precarious example. In this way, his or her political alignment is actively refracted rather than passively reiterated.

I want to look at Themerson’s work through this ethical lens in order to draw out such tendencies in his own considerable body of work. If this seems contrived, it’s worth noting that he consistently and explicitly dealt with the subject of ‘ethics’ himself – though never in a manner as dry as I’m making it sound. I’ll offer a few specific examples, and we’ll end by watching a film that features the man himself and hopefully embodies what I’m getting at.

I first came across his work as an undergraduate studying Typography in the early 1990s. Flipping through a book called *The Visible Word*, I was arrested by a couple of pages of eccentrically-typeset text. This technique, I learned, was called Internal Vertical Justification, or IVJ for short.




As you can see, it involves arranging language in order to emphasize meaning – an extreme example of the project of typography generally. Paragraphs, sentences and words are carefully configured

according to their relational grammatical sense. *The Visible Word* was a compendium of experiments that pushed the possibilities of verbal graphic language, but compared to the other examples, which I can only describe as more 'academic', it stood out as funny. Not laugh-out-loud funny, more a sort of winking – distinctly *off*, and so especially engaging. Also unlike most of the rest of the book, it *worked*; the method proved itself.

I later found out that Themerson had invented (if that's the word) Internal Vertical Justification while learning English. When searching for the correct word to translate from Polish, he would list alternatives, then carry on with the sentence – a running Thesaurus. You can see the residue of that basic logic in its sophisticated development. At the time, this seemed even more instructive to me – that Themerson had taken a practical, mundane means for more efficiently learning a language, and transformed it into a more broadly operational proposal for more efficiently communicating ideas. As such, it's one minor instance of what I think Benjamin was getting at – in this case, reflectively tinkering in the machine room of language, possibly in order to subvert it.

The lesson IVJ has to offer in the longer term is to show how verbal and graphic language – *what it says* and *how it looks* – can be productively conflated. That's to say, it's

two-fold
simultaneous
entwined
mutually-affecting
symbiotic

(though not without some obvious drawbacks, such as the space necessary; the real estate of the page.)

Anyway, IVJ lodged somewhere in my mind. I didn't realize at the time it was only a gear in a much bigger machine, which I'll come back to later.

Now, *General Piesc* is the title and protagonist of one of Themerson's later short novels – just 54 pages – from 1976. (Could someone pronounce that for me … ? That's right – sounds like 'punch' in English, and means 'fist' in Polish: another symbiosis, in this case a multilingual one.) Having suddenly won a lot of money and become unwittingly liberated from his wife who's run off with another man, this apparently discombobulated general sets out to fulfil a lifelong mission. Along the way he forgets the nature of that mission, at which point he finds happiness.

This brisk tale is mostly told through a handful of letters exchanged between the protagonist's family and friends, the most consequential being a plea to the general from his daughter, a Princess Zuppa, that includes the following exhortation:

> The Greek males thought geometry was the thing. Dr Zamenhof thought Esperanto was the thing. Jesus-Christ thought the dialectical loaf of bread was the thing. And geometry produced bazookas. And polyglotism produced more quarrels. And love produced hatred. And none of these great things has proved to be more (what is the right word) efficacious (?) than what I, in my female way, would like to call 'good manners'.[39]

I've put the paragraph up on the screen so you can witness the character questioning herself in the last line – worrying over the word 'efficacious', just like Themerson deliberating the exactitude of alternatives from his Polish-English Thesaurus. Note that she/he is careful to choose the correct word *as well as point to her/himself carefully choosing.* I take this as part of the point: that worrying over

[39] Themerson, *General Piesc*, op. cit., pp. 32–3.

nuance, the concern to communicate correctly, is itself a very good-mannered, perhaps even the 'female' thing to do.

Now I've always considered this statement profoundly modernist, though not in a sense particularly congruent with what most people take 'modernism' to mean. What I mean is nothing to do with neoplastics or international styles or any other brand of formalism. It is, however, in line with what was once called 'the modern movement', which I personally read as shorthand for an attitude or set of attitudes *in advance of form*; attitudes that fundamentally resist hardening into

rules
doctrines
ideologies
dogmas
absolutes

In other words, a state of mind perpetually oriented towards breaking from what Themerson once called 'customary modes of thought', that embraces – attempts to embrace – contingencies, particularities and exceptions.

Moreover, these are qualities native to the literary form of the *essay*, which literally means 'attempt' – to some extent, then, a making-it-up-as-you-go-along, a *reaching*. According to T.W. Adorno (who wrote an essay about it), the procedural logic of the essay is 'comparable to the behaviour of a man who is obliged, in a foreign country, to speak that country's language instead of patching it together from its elements, as he did in school.' Here's another fragment:

> He will read without a dictionary. If he has looked at the same word thirty times, in *constantly changing contexts*, he has a clearer grasp of it than he would if he looked up all the word's meanings; meanings that are generally too vague in view of the nuances that the context establishes in every individual case, just as such learning remains exposed to error, so does the essay as form; it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security ... [As such] The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, and not in a hoarding obsession with fundamentals.[40]

Returning to *General Piesc*, it gradually dawns on the reader that the general's 'mission' is some such fundamental goal, some heroic sacrifice or other, and one that the princess is trying desperately to divert by awakening in him a let's say *pointedly freewheeling* attitude instead. 'You see', she says,

> we don't want saviours anymore. All saviours disrupt normal evolutionary processes, which anyway will go their own way. The way may be tragic ... But what saviours do when they start meddling with it, is to make the tragedy still more painful.[41]

In conclusion, she asserts that 'all ideologies, all missions, all (capital-A) Aims corrupt good manners.'

In his hysterical analysis of historical models, Themerson notes that the Greeks', Christ's, Zamenhof's and Marx's plans for progress all are founded on Saving Graces and Big Ideas, that these Savers are invariably men, and that the premise of the Big Idea is always conceived in view of end results: once achieved the rest will fall into place. Problem solved: end of story.

On the contrary, Themerson's female 'good manners' are always contingent – radically contingent – because the efficacy of whatever deed is always relative; it always hinges on the specific

[40] Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', op. cit., p. 161. See also §1.3.

[41] Themerson, *General Piesc*, op. cit., p. 32.

circumstances. It's not always good manners to help old ladies across roads, only particular old ladies who want to cross particular roads. Real good manners, then, don't take the form of axiomatic aims, but bunches of habits, which we could sum up as a

demeanour
disposition
bearing
temperament
inclination

When I first read Themerson's 'good manners' as an infant graphic designer, I understood it, obscurely, as a maxim for designing, for organizing stuff with intelligence. The idea seemed to tally with certain pedagogical platitudes: *work without preconceptions* … *meet the limits of the brief* … *resist stylistic fashions* … *let the content speak* … and so on. That's what that modern movement means to me: strictly *movement*: a thinking-on-your-feet and a keeping-on-your-toes.

Themerson's other novels are likewise full of such ethical insight, sharp and blunt at the same time. In the perpetual attempt to say it more carefully, more precisely, he induces the reader on the other end to think more carefully, more precisely. Themerson teaches by example: considerateness is passed on by osmosis.

There's a theory about language you hear a lot these days that goes something like this: Because we know the world through language, as the nuances of language get eroded, limited, simplified, dumbed-down, it follows that our interface with the world, and so our experience of it, will follow suit. In other words, it will become

impoverished
bland
monotonous
one-dimensional
wasted

If these sentiments sound familiar, you're probably remembering a well-known essay from 1946 by George Orwell called 'Politics and the English Language'. Like Themerson's, Orwell performs his opinions with alacrity. 'Most people who bother with the matter at all' he writes, 'would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot … do anything about it.' This fatalist point of view says: 'Our civilization is decadent and our language must inevitably share in the general collapse.' He goes on:

> it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes ... But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form ... A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks ... [The same thing is] happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.[42]

Orwell's point is that this process is not inevitable but actively *reversible*. Modern English is full of bad habits, he says, 'which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble … to *let the meaning choose the word*, and not the other way around.' In fact, he continues, 'It is probably a good idea to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures and sensations.' Then afterward, 'one can *choose* – not simply accept – the phrases that will

[42] George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon,* vol. 13 no. 76, April 1946, pp. 252–265.

best cover the meaning …'. Finally, he says that although his suggestions may sound elementary, in fact they require 'a deep change of attitude in anyone who has grown used to writing in the style now fashionable.'[43]

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Orwell's point is political as well as literary, and, true to his text, he makes this perfectly clear: 'If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration'.[44]

Themerson dealt with ethics most directly in one of his latest pieces of work, a 1981 lecture titled 'The Chair of Decency'. In it, he elucidates Princess Zuppa's allusion that good manners are categorically female. The talk's key idea is that, contrary to received wisdom, man is a biologically gentle species, (benevolent, altruistic, loving) who turns aggressive (vicious, corrupt, savage) through cultural influence. He supports the hypothesis by pointing out the fairly foolproof evidence that mothers don't eat their children, which he calls 'innate decency'.

A friend recently wrote to me about the critical theory's relationship to the notion of change. She wrote that social or political theory as conceived by, say, the Frankfurt School (i.e. the Marxist critical theory that was practiced by Benjamin and continued by Adorno, among others) involves reflecting on a given condition in order to suggest a solution that's designed to improve that condition. This sounds reasonable and obvious enough: illness, examination, diagnosis, prescription, health.

However, Gilles Deleuze considers this way of conceiving the world exactly the wrong way round, because it implies that the default condition is stasis where the real constant is in fact *change*. From this inverted critical perspective, then, the aim is to consider how and why things *resist* the natural flow of change, then work to remove whatever blockage. I'm simplifying wildly, but what's instructive in terms of Themerson and ethics, is that Deleuze rethinks political or personal agency away from *anticipating ideal outcomes* and towards *altering ongoing habits*. Themerson put it this way: 'in this changing world, the way from premises to conclusions is temporal and stormy, and you can't force *your* Yesterday upon your *grandson's* Tomorrow'.

This adds up to Themerson's formula that 'means are more important than aims' – that ways of going about things (naturally *decent* ways) are ultimately more important than what is done. 'There do exist tragic situations when wicked means have to be used to suppress some other wicked means', he admits; 'but to use wicked means *to promote aims* – defeats the aims.' It short-circuits them. (To step out of the abstraction for a moment, you only have to think of how wicked means have been used to promote the aims of certain foreign policies in the past decade to see what he's getting at. He's talking about the sort of hypocrisy that has very real effects on very many lives.)

Which brings us to a lovely elliptical motto at the heart of his talk: *decency of means is the aim of aims*. If you stare at it long enough you'll see this is a recursive sentence – not unlike 'this sentence is a lie'. In fact, it *has* to be a recursive sentence in order to aptly embody itself, i.e. to remain perpetually active. It's a sentence that refuses to settle, but that doesn't mean you can't glimpse its meaning.

Next, I want to discuss something between an essay, a diagram, and a timeline called 'Kurt Schwitters on a Time Chart'. It's Themerson's visualization of the German dadaist's work relative to what was going on in the world before, during, and after it was made. They met by accident at a conference in London in 1943. Themerson was preoccupied by Schwitters fiddling with a piece of bent metal during the lectures. They started talking, discovered they were fellow intellectuals and creative independents, and remained in close correspondence until Schwitters' death five years later.

What I want to emphasize is that as well as *being* a piece of history, the time chart *itself* has a long history, and that this history is folded into its evolving *form*. It started life as 'Schwitters' Last Notebook', an informal talk that Themerson gave at the Common Room in 1958, a decade after the

[43] All ibid.

[44] Ibid.

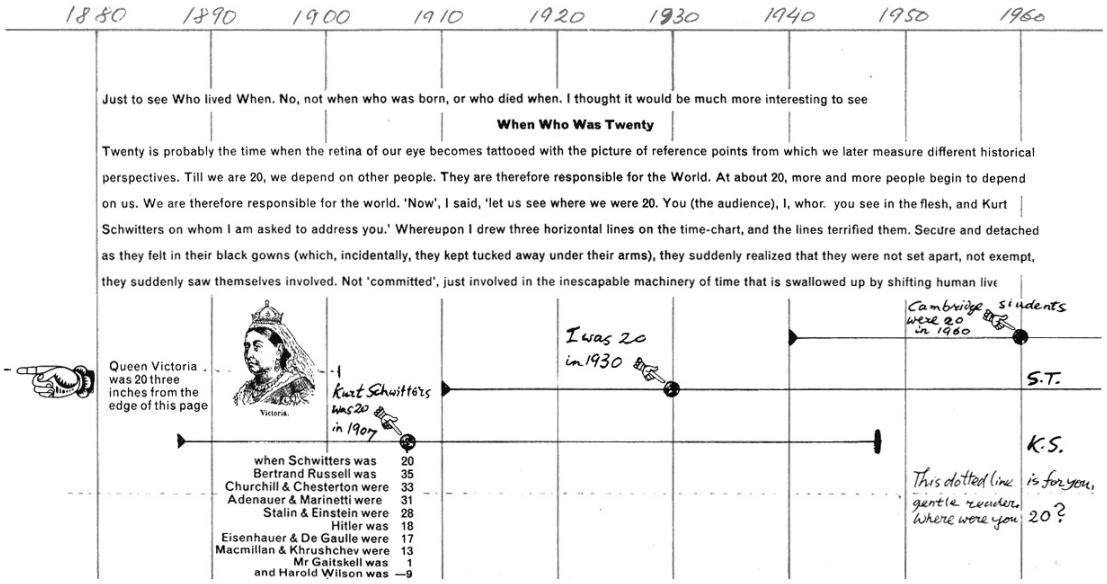
artist's death, probably to a bunch of people not unlike ourselves who had gathered to look and think about someone else's work.



Later the same year, a rewritten version of the talk was the basis for this Gaberbocchus publication, *Kurt Schwitters in England*, combined with reproductions of Schwitters' collages, poetry and prose to form a particularly tactile object – a visibly *spirited*, knockabout kind of a monograph.




Then, three years later in 1961, Themerson prepared a revised version of the talk, presented in a more formal setting to a group of 20-year-old students in Cambridge. After a brief introduction, he drew a time-line on an overhead projector, then plotted three dots. The first one marked when Schwitters was 20 (in 1907). The second one marked when Themerson himself was 20 (in 1930). And the last one marked now, today – meaning then, in 1960 – when the audience were 20.



He later recalled the apparent force with which the normally passive, detached students seemed suddenly thrown into time: 'history' was now alive, activated, and they were accordingly implicated, involved. (Just as we are tonight, too – all variously 20 somewhere around here, off the edge of the chart, and even further along tonight.) As the talk proceeded, Themerson continued adding elements to the chart, gradually assembling the broader cultural context in which Schwitters made his work.

We're all used to considering art in regard to its original context, to the extent that it would be impertinent not to at least pretend to do so. But Themerson goes a step further here, visualizing it to such a degree that his audience is effectively trapped: as this map materializes live before you, there's no way *not* to 'contextualize'. You might say he resuscitates the idea – breathes new life into 'contextualizing' in a way that's both provocative and playful. *Not unlike his subject*.

Themerson had good reasons for doing so. He reminds the audience of the horrific crucible ('that bloody stinking pit of European history nobody wants to remember') in which Schwitters' frequently delicate and beautiful work was concocted. He also shows how the work *changed and continues to change* according to when and where and how it's seen.

The time chart is a *collage*, Schwitters' own medium of choice (or circumstance): discrete found elements reassembled to form a new whole, the graphic equivalent of how Adorno describes the essay form. What ought to be apparent, though, is that what's going on here is not a simple aping of Schwitters' style, but a complex extension of his spirit.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, because what you've been looking at is not the acetate drawn and projected at Cambridge, but a later graphic translation of the same. If the Common Room talk was the first iteration, the *England* book the second, and the Cambridge lecture the third, this is the fourth, prepared some six weeks after the lecture but only published six *years* later, in 1967 – and then only just, as the last piece in the last issue of an 18-year old magazine called *Typographica*.

The chart was configured to scroll at 90 degrees through the magazine's A4 portrait pages in red and black ink. Themerson's first draft ran to 28 pages, which was almost double the editor's offer of 16, so it had to be cut back to 20, presumably with much difficulty and negotiation. Given the technology of the time, assembling this thing for print was no straightforward task. This only makes what I consider a masterpiece *lecture in plan view* even more impressive; but in a letter accompanying the artwork, Themerson wrote:

> Here it is. And I am horrified. I have read it again, and I hate every word of it ... What I would really have liked – well, I would have liked to be able to enjoy Kurt Schwitters' work lightly, for the 'pleasure it gives to the eye.' And yet I couldn't write it in that key. It's wrong, possibly, nevertheless it irritates me when I see people handling a collage by Schwitters as if it were a bunch of lovely flowers.[45]

He added that the editor could print this disclaimer a post-script to the chart – but it seems they really *had* run out of space, or time, as it didn't appear in the version eventually published.

In a few minutes we're going to finish with a 40-minute film made for Dutch TV, directed by Erik van Zuylen in 1976. Zuylen also wrote the script, though it's mostly based on Themerson's writings. A 66-year-old Stefan stars in it as actor and interlocutor.

The film needs a bit of prefacing for a few reasons. Foremost, because it's often difficult to make out what's being said. This is the effect of heavy Polish and Dutch accents speaking English, compounded by a general stiltedness arising from the fact that much of the time the players are visibly reading from a script. There's a lot of noise in the signal, then, but there's also a certain amount of self-reflexivity

[45] Stefan Themerson, 'Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart' [1967] (Oude Tonge: Huis-Clos, 1998), inside cover.

and time-travel at play too, and while understanding the references is by no means essential to enjoying what's going on, I'm pretty sure that at least *some* background knowledge makes the whole thing less baffling. Trust me, I'm trying my hardest here to feed you only enough for starters that you remain hungry for the main course.

The film is in three parts. The first takes place on or around a bandstand in Amsterdam's Vondelpark; the second comprises an interview with a spectacularly annoying professional orator; the third involves a walk along a very windy beach, during which Themerson continues to be interrogated by a sort of personal 'policeman' played by Dutch neo-Dadaist Wim T. Schippers. Of these three, only the opening scene in the park requires elucidation.

One of Themerson's earliest books from 1949, *Bayamus*, is an absurdist skit. The philosopher Bertrand Russell called it 'nearly as mad as the world'. In it, a vaguely autobiographical protagonist meets the character Bayamus who – this will give you some idea of the tone – skates around London on a genetically evolved roller-skate at the end of his third leg. The narrator recounts his journey, under the direction of Bayamus, to a lecture at the Theatre of Semantic Poetry, the nature of which is as mysterious to the narrator as it is to the reader. About three-quarters of the way through the tale, he is met at the entrance of this Theatre by two well-dressed gentlemen and, to his surprise, led up onto the stage, where it gradually dawns, with understandable discomfort, that *he's the one expected to give the lecture*.

This is the point at which we enter the film – with the added twist that Themerson the author is playing the role of his protagonist double some 26 years after writing and publishing him.

Now – again just to be clear – this 'Semantic Poetry' was something that Themerson had, in his own words (or something like them, as I've never been able to relocate the source), 'invented using a machine made from certain parts of my brain'; and *Bayamus* was one of several vehicles he used to demonstrate its efficacy. It's a literary method that subverts existing forms of language, typically poems or songs, by replacing the original words with precise – that's extremely, absurdly, sarcastically, *righteously* precise – dictionary definitions. Themerson *semantically translates*, then, in the sense that he extracts strangely exact meanings from vague clichéd allusions. The method is usually demonstrated by comparing existing poems or songs with a semantically translated version. Again you'll notice the line back to Themerson grappling with his Polish-English dictionaries and thesauruses, the toolboxes of language.

For example, from this:

The wine among the flowers,
O lonely me!

to this:

The fermented
grape-
juice
among the reproductive
parts
of
seed-plants

O! I'm conscious
of
my state
of
being isolated
from
others!

Semantic Translation is more double-edged than this brief description suggests. Although it's *ostensibly* an attempt to reclaim the 'truth' behind words, the proposition is essentially ironic, not

proselytizing. It's more accurate to say that at best 'truths' are more properly 'beliefs', and that beliefs should be treated with the utmost suspicion. One of the great benefits of the technique is that it reminds us how 'the world is more complicated than the language we use to talk about it. The nature of reading through the pedantic extent of a piece of Semantic Translation is to experience language made strange, to perceive both its technical depth along with its limitations. Themerson referred to this as 'scratching the form to reveal the content'.

On one hand Semantic Translation is very funny – albeit what he calls 'a poker-faced kind of humour', which points to the fact that, as usual, Themerson's intentions are as serious as they are comic. Semantic Poetry Translation was his brain-machine's natural reaction to political demagoguery. It called attention to the fact that politicians had latterly begun appropriating poetry's means – rhyme, syntax, repetition, alliteration and other tools of such as Themerson's trade – to dubious or downright evil ends, variously intoxicating or lulling public minds into potentially pernicious 'customary modes of thought'. As such, Themerson isn't making a serious plea for linguistic reform, as Orwell was, but rather a hysterical, satirical, political gesture: a fist and a punch.

I said near the beginning that I'd return to that typographic technique of Themerson's, Internal Vertical Justification, and here it is. Although he pulls pedantic definitions out of words throughout the story, and his writing generally has a similar technical precision, Semantic Poetry is always organized according to the eccentric but entirely meaningful logic of IVJ: 'IVJ for SPT', as he nicely abbreviates it in the book. There's nothing stopping anyone writing or typesetting such a semantic translation in continuous lines – except common sense, because, as you can imagine, it would be very difficult to read or comprehend. There's something else going on here too, to do with horizontal harmonies and vertical chords, but the film explains all that well enough.

The various genealogies of work I've recounted here manifest a self-critical spirit, a propensity to change. Ideas are perpetually revisited, revised, refined, but never merely recycled, always strictly *transformed*. The body of work has a life of its own. Themerson was vehemently against the sort of literary biography that joins the dots between a few loose anecdotes about an artist's life and a few concrete pieces of work, and I think this is because, to an unusual degree, he's very palpably *in* the work already. If you're looking to the art for any insight on the life of the artist, then you're looking in precisely the wrong place. 'Bibliography is my biography', he once said. Meaning: anything of consequence for anyone else is strictly in the work; all else is superfluous.

Back at the start I said my task was to look at how Themerson's ethics 'come across in less blatant ways' than in his writing. Here's a by no means absolute summation:

First, in Gaberbocchus' loose, knockabout publishing program, which was equally happy putting out eccentric children's books, surreal novels, philosophical cartoons, and pointed memoirs. One fan noted that there's 'a madness about various Gaberbocchus books which is the spice of life, an ingredient somewhat lacking in the world of (most) book production.'

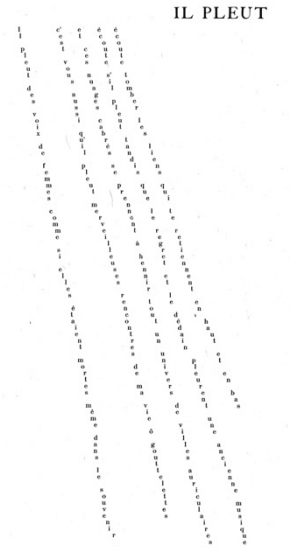
Second, in the particular brand of *serious humour* – perhaps not far removed from that madness – that infected, and still infects, pretty much everything Themerson made.

Third, in the readiness to work outside received wisdom – not for the sake of being different or new, but certainly to interrogate those 'conventional modes of thought' that if unchecked might turn malign.

Fourth, in the agility to hop across – or flat-out ignore – disciplinary boundaries, and otherwise eschew categories or classifications generally.

Fifth, in the way the work is *well-adjusted*; meaning, aware of its audience and pitched accordingly, yet without ever toning down its essential anarchy. (A quick flip through any of their children's books proves this point.)

Sixth, in the modesty and self-criticality that led to certain works being *re*worked, refined over time: a perennially active flow of thought, now and then made public in presentations and objects.




You're probably all familiar with this poem, 'Il Pleut', the well-known calligram by 19th-century French poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Themerson was a huge fan, and wrote an exemplary essay on his work. I'm ending on this image (or is it text?), as a mascot-of-sorts for the talk, because the calligram, as you know, is a poetic form whose meaning and appearance are tautologous, one and the same: the arrangement of the letters of a poem about rain that form the image of rain.

I put it to you, then, that it's no surprise Themerson was so fond of the calligrams, because what he's after *ethically* is precisely in line with what Apollinaire achieves *aesthetically*. What I mean is, as a generic form – as a 'type' – the calligram is useful shorthand for practising what you preach … which, in doing so doesn't seem to preach at all. Better yet: it cuts out the *need* for preaching altogether.

As a case in point, then, let's watch Van Zuylen's film, which you'll see is a very odd creature. When the director first proposed the idea, Themerson refused; not least, apparently, because the proposal involved an interview, a format that Themerson distrusted just as much as biography, and for presumably similar reasons. This didn't stop him *parodying* the technique in his fiction, usually in the form of a police interrogation. His objection, however, set in motion a dialogue that led Van Zuylen to re-propose turning Themerson's own technique back on himself: interrogated by his own policeman, his own body of work placed under suspicion and scrutiny. Together, in dialogue, they take the format, the customary mode, and custom*ize* it. This, I conclude, is a prime case of *aesthethical* decency, too.




## 7.6: THREE PALIMPSEST TALKS

Next, some work by three contemporary artists, the first two of whom have already cropped up in previous chapters: Ryan Gander, Seth Price, and Mark Leckey. The particular pieces I want to consider are not typical of any of them. They are hybrid works, various compounds of patently 'pedagogical', explanatory formats including the public lecture, the artist's talk, the documentary and the essay film –

– only these genre conventions are abused as much as used in order to end up larger-than-life, a little bit askance. This deliberately *affected* quality becomes the essence of the emergent work.

In each case, the artists attempt to get outside of their usual flow of production in order to take stock, to shed light on their work from a more disinterested vantage (and perhaps cut a new path in the process), and to come out of the stock enigmatic character of the contemporary artist – a drive I like to think is in deliberate reaction to the more common and comfortable appeal to obfuscation. Like Themerson's line of work on Schwitters, each case involves making something new by either directly referring to their existing body of work, or by dealing with a topic that has an obvious metonymical relation to it.

And so I mean to suggest that these two aspects – candidly attempting to explain things clearly *for once*, and reworking work in order to improve it – are contemporary instances of the ethical gestures that characterize Themerson's work.



Ryan Gander's *Loose Associations Lectures* have been delivered – or 'performed' – in one form or another around a hundred times since its debut to a handful of people in 2002.[46] As the title suggests, the lectures comprise a series of anecdotes connected by tenuous relational glue. Many of the links are coherent enough, but Ryan also deadpans just as many contrived ones to make it clear that the whole thing is as much about the structure as the stories. The talks are typical of his wider body of work in highlighting everyday formal phenomena that are easily overlooked – especially those that are ubiquitous to the point of invisibility. They are about paying attention. The first iteration of the first lecture begins:

> These are desire lines. At least, that's what spatial planners call them. This first photo was taken in Kassel in Germany ... I'm talking about the lines on the ground here. When spatial designers plan pavements, there are always bits of waste ground left between them and when they don't design them properly you get these desire lines that have been worn away by people who cut across the middle ...[47]

The talk then proceeds through a compendium of this sort of miscellany, from lines via signs via appropriation via censorship via codes via graffiti via typefaces via symbols to end up at fictional languages – specifically, *Star Trek*'s Klingon. Ryan runs rapidly through the anecdotes, punctuated by quick-fire images and circumstantial banter. It's an ideal medium for a natural raconteur, and after a decade or so of repetition, the lectures still come across as freshly reigned-in streams-of-consciousness.

But this enduring vitality is just as much a result of their gradually changing function. The lectures began as a practical bank of backstories, a scrapbook of fundamental research that Ryan gradually drew into other, more regular work – photographs, sculptures, installations, films, and so on. In these half-

[46] There are actually two versions (the second picks up where the trail of the first leaves off), both of which tend to expand or contract depending on the particular context – the nature of the audience and allotted amount of time, etc. Both have been published in *Dot Dot Dot* (#s 6 and 7), as well as a variety of other publications including: Ryan Gander, *Appendix* (Amsterdam: Artimo, 2004); Stuart Bailey and Ryan Gander, *Appendix Appendix* (Zurich: JRP, 2007); and Ryan Gander, *Loose Associations and Other Lectures* (Paris: Onestar Press, 2007).

[47] Bailey and Gander, *Appendix*, op. cit., p. 102.

sarcastic, happily self-conscious talks he'd stumbled on a unique and uniquely generative format, a core work and a repository for the rest. Moreover, where that 'more regular' work tends to be in-jokey, self-referential and abstruse, the lectures are the polar opposite: straightforward, endearing and accessible. And so, in line with his rising profile, these frequent performances of the loose associations that permeate his larger body of work have served as a point of explanatory access. I imagine an unusually large audience has been introduced to Ryan's work via this oddball running commentary. The work is its own PR, all the more plausible for having been written in the first person.



Back in the first chapter, I noted Seth Price's essay-work 'Dispersion' (2002–) for two reasons.[48] First, because it exemplifies the original sense of 'essay', being an attempt to nail some free-ranging thoughts in hard text written in a spirit of interrogation. Second, because the way that it operates – loosely assembled, perpetually overwritten, freely distributed, widely read and discussed – embodies its topic, i.e. ways to overcome the domesticating effects of the current art system. It's at once a timely slice of art history, a statement of intent *and* a case in point: in its own words, 'a direct expression of a process of production'. As Tim Griffin says (of Price's pseudo self-help book *How to Disappear in America* (2008)): 'Someone, it seems, is telling readers how to tell stories, forge false trails, or cover up old ones, but only while telling stories, forging false trails, or covering up old ones – showing by doing.'[49]

Five years on from 'Dispersion', Price's similarly open-ended video piece *Redistribution* (2007–) continues in the same direct, searching and self-illustrating vein as 'Dispersion'. It's based on footage of an actual, stereotypical artist's talk given at the Guggenheim Museum ('Hello. Thanks, Nancy. I'm going to show slides of my work from the last six or seven years …') overlaid and intercut with other stuff – illustrations, additional voiceover comments, digital effects, along with images and excerpts of Price's older work. It begins:

> I'm like a person who makes things. You do it one after another, unending. It goes on for such a long time: something new, and something else, and something something. Here come a lot of different strategies and arrangements, all interesting, all interlocking, mutatis mutandis ... Such a lot of things! And then the question will be put to you: If you have something to say, why not simply say it? Why the elaborate games, the things that stand in for other things ...[50]

Where 'Dispersion' was scattered with examples of conceptual work that pre-empted Price's concerns ('interventions into the social consciousness', e.g. Dan Graham's *Harper's Bazaar* ads), *Redistribution* draws more on Price's own work since. In 'Dispersion' he described Duchamp's urinal *Fountain* as consisting in 'a circuit of reading', a 'palimpsest of gestures, presentations, and positions'. For instance, Duchamp's own anonymous article about the work in the self-published journal *The Blind Man*, or the signature photograph of it he commissioned from Alfred Stieglitz. Price builds on this model in *Redistribution* by juxtaposing his work with curious observations – such as the meditation on a turd at the front of a Breughel painting. He pre-empts third-party interpretations by asserting his own

[48] See §1.3.

[49] Tim Griffin, 'The Personal Effects of Seth Price', *Artforum*, Summer 2009, p. 285.

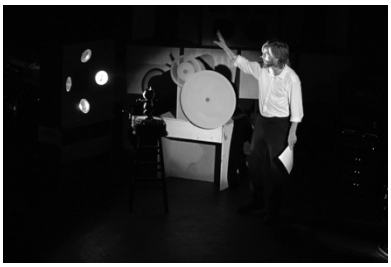
[50] Seth Price, 'Redistribution (video transcript)', *Price, Seth* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2010), p. 77.

circuit of reading. Griffin concurs, noting that Price's self-captioning work is means of avoiding a fixed identity courtesy of others' analysis: 'the artist is likely aware of being continually measured against the existing record – his own or that of his antecedents'. Past and future tend to collapse in art, he says, 'as the production and reception of each new work alters the way older ones are read, and as each new reading of an older work changes the terms for a new work's reception.'[51]

Beyond all the earnest essaying, there's something else, something *extra* going on in both 'Dispersion' and *Redistribution*; an ambient weirdness conjured by the scattershot, open-sourced nature of the supplementary material. Iconic art and other historical references (Dürer's *Melancholia*, Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, Breughel's *Kinderspiele,* the patents for Edison's electrical devices) are interspersed with wacky clip-art, ersatz graphic patterns (Memphis wallpaper, airbrush textures, technical graphs, found icons), screensavers and digital after-effects that were once aggressively futuristic and are now distinctly retrograde. The jumble of elements is artlessly arranged by a kind of anti-design that's not exactly ugly, more deliberately clunky, based on the defaults and templates of whatever software has been used in each case; and these defaults and templates are, of course, simultaneously part of the endless flow of digital matter under consideration.

The curator and writer Polly Staple has observed that 'Dispersion' is often taken as a stand-in for Price himself – a soft manifesto, a means of simultaneously recording and asserting a set of intentions.[52] *Redistribution* does this more explicitly, an attempt to work out in public what the work is and where it might fit. It ends on this inverse illumination:

> There's a question to which no artwork has an answer, to which every artwork is susceptible, which is, so what? There is no answer. You ask it of yourself, as an artist, and there's only silence. It's not a nihilistic question, or pointless scepticism, because the silence produced is actually useful. This silence records an echo: the artist has made a noise and prepared some kind of recording device to capture the echo that comes back. Your utterance now has a shadow that cannot be cast off. That shadow is the work.[53]



My last example of positively palimpsestuous work is similarly explicatory, ingratiating and self-reflexive. It's a triptych of lecture-based pieces by Mark Leckey. Though not conceived or presented as a series by Leckey himself, inasmuch as each new work builds on the most propulsive aspects of its predecessor, the sequence suggests as much. Again the whole combines conventions common to performance, film, video, installation, and lecture; and its three parts have circulated, variously edited, as texts.

The first, *CINEMA-in-the-ROUND* (2009), began life as a talk at a film festival, an attempt to apprehend the ways in which 3D matter – weight, density, volume, mass, *stuffness* – are made palpable in 2D media like films, videos and paintings. It begins:

[51] Ibid., p. 287.

[52] Polly Staple, 'The Producer', *frieze*, no. 118, October 2008.

[53] Price, 'Redistribution (video transcript)', op. cit., p. 101.

> This presentation is an attempt, by me, to try and grasp a particular experience that I have with certain things in the world, things that I mistake for images or pictures, but that somehow impose on me their actual weight, density, and volume—their being in the world. This sensation is further enhanced when a picture is moving. This whole thing then is called *CINEMA-in-the-ROUND*. It is in four chapters, the first one being 'Meat and Potatoes' ...[54]

Leckey assembles others' work (Philip Guston's paintings, films by Gilbert & George and Hollis Frampton) together with examples from pop culture (*Roadrunner*, *Titanic*, various cartoon cats), stuck together with a seriously stylized commentary – a glut of plummy, heavily onomatopoeic language, the verbal equivalent of Guston's meaty torsos and limbs:

> So they are Grey and they are Pink
> They are Dense and they are Rude
> They are Earthy and they are Hearty
> And as paintings that feel like sculptures – or as the Campbell's ad at the time said: *They are the soup that eats like a meal*.[55]

Two versions of the same talk were filmed and combined into a single work, with its copious source material edited into the flow of the footage (i.e. rather than playing on a screen behind Leckey at the podium) along with a number of peculiar moments that confuse the straightforward sense of documentary (Leckey lifting a bottle of beer to the camera, suddenly wearing an outsize Homer Simpson mask, etc.). The result is distinctly unrefined, a deliberately dumb, punchy populist piece in line with its block-headed subject, closest in spirit to a TV skit, sketch or variety show.

The same character is carried over into the performative lecture *Mark Leckey in The Long Tail* (2010). This one's more pointedly *staged* than it's predecessor, with an array of props from a blackboard to a giant furry tail with a life/mind of its own. Like *CINEMA-in-the-ROUND*, though, the script tries to get a handle on a hard-to-grasp phenomenon. This time it's the prevailing shape of culture founded on a 'long tail' model of consumerism currently supplanting the pyramidical one that dominated the 20th century. This 'shape' charts the rise of esoteric interests and niche markets into an amorphous, anonymous mass of culture facilitated by internet-facilitated swarms, seeds, peers and leeches. It supplants the top-down, hierarchical model of Bestsellers and Top Tens.

Like the former talk, too, Leckey's language ventriloquizes its subject:

> The swarm machine begins to thrum again, humming the song of myself / their fugue begins / and once more I am assumed by the swarm / made manifest in its multitude / between like minds / swarming out and surrounding me / here in this moment / this moment of shared mutualism / and I surrender / I surrender to the attraction / I surrender to the attraction of increased pleasure / and I become ascendant in the swarm / I am of the swarm / I am the swarm / and the swarm is me ...[56]

*The Long Tail* assimilates Leckey's earlier (and continuing) preoccupations with local subcultures and talismanic objects. However, as with Gander's and Price's talks, compared to their previous output these new 'container' pieces are almost comically accessible.

[54] Mark Leckey, 'CINEMA-in-the-ROUND' in: Mark Beasley, ed., *Hey Hey Glossolalia (After)* (New York: Creative Time, 2009), p. 149.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Mark Leckey, 'The Long Tail', *Dot Dot Dot* #20, 2010, p. 149.

This is less true of the most recent of this group, the existential *Greenscreenrefrigerator* (2012), a blunt return to objecthood after the immaterial *Long Tail*. Leckey again recorded himself in front of an audience, this time speaking the part of a monumental black Samsung fridge-freezer stood in the middle of a chroma-key green backdrop. This allowed for the later superimposition of other stock images, footage and animation. Leckey's heavily Auto-tuned scouse accent – supposedly the sound of what happens if you suck fridge coolant – is just about discernible as it emerges from the aether as the voice of the anthropomorphic fridge:

> Each to each. In each order. In each group. Address each one. They ask and they answer. They ask, each one answers. Each one carries the news. Standing here. Standing here beside myself. Out of my mind. Out of my mind, I liken myself to other things. A dark mirror. A walled garden. A monstrous insect ...

The appliance goes on to contemplate its limited lifespan in geological time, and the inevitable return to the earth along with all matter. It is an odd and oddly moving soliloquy to the material world.

By attempting to speak as clearly as possible from the middle of their subject matter, Gander, Price and Leckey transform their recurring interests – and often their former work – into something distinctly *other*. At the same time, they knowingly point to themselves *being* overtly communicative – that's part of the subject matter, too. The direct address is in good faith, though, and stands in relief against the proliferation of lazy, mute, or otherwise brazenly *un*communicative work that dominates the current art scene – the sort of stuff that seems to consider itself exempt from bothering to engage an audience at all.

Price refers to this act of reconciliation as the 'real work':

> The 'artist's statement,' for example, or lectures like this one: the artist is used as a bridge from one frame to another. In a funny way, to speak about my own work now, looking at these slides of older work, feels like a splitting. People often hear what the artist has to say, what lies 'behind' the work, yet at the same time it's taken as performance ...[57]

## 7.7: FRIENDLY FIRE

This exchange of letters between Will Holder and myself was begun in view of a contribution to the Tate's in-house journal *Tate Etc.*[58] They were written in anticipation of the fifth iteration of a running project of ours called *Tourette's* that was due to take place at Tate Modern a few months later under the rubric of a small group show called *Stutter*.[59] As is recounted in the opening paragraphs below, *Tourette's* had so far found form as two collections of writing and one concentrated week of events. These letters were partly contrived to 'inadvertently' fill in the background of the project for a potential audience, and to anticipate the themes likely to guide our contribution to *Stutter*. I'm including them here as another attempt to describe (and perform) the ethics inherent in Themerson's work. The key 'ethic' under interrogation here might be summarized as: the necessary awkwardness of real friendship.

Dear Will,

You've been accusing me of repeating myself like a drunken bore, quoting me back at myself to make your point. This makes for very uncomfortable reading. Last night I came across the following, which

[57] Price, 'Redistribution (video transcript)', op. cit., p. 84.

[58] Will Stuart, 'An Exchange of Letters in Advance of TV', *Tate Etc.* (2010).

[59] See chapter 2, fn. 11.

sums up your accusations: ‘This is what happens: you imagine the things I will say and then say them for me and then become angry with them. Without my mouth; it never opens. You speak to yourself, inventing sides. This itself is the habit of children: lazy, lonely, self. I am not even here, possibly, for listening to.’

Shall we step out of this closed loop? Stop quoting and try to understand enough to paraphrase each other instead, to work out how to proceed with TOURETTE’S V (TV) by raking over the coals of previous editions.

Remember the note we wrote in the colophon of the first: ‘TOURETTE’S believe that a lot has been said already, and if we all keep trying to repeat and improve ourselves in new ways, some of the nicest things might get lost in the resulting pile.’ We needed an event to flag up that one’s existence, which became TOURETTE’S II (the word made flesh), eight evenings of performance, films, readings and talks, encouraged by a curator, Ann DeMeester, who recognised what we were up to was ‘adolescent’. Thinking back reminds me how a lot of what we haphazardly strung together had the same qualities we intended with the title: the uncontrolled tic of sudden, repetitive urges. So whether that excerpt from Michael Haneke’s film *The Seventh Continent* (1989) where a family systematically destroys their own house; the audio recording of a séance with Yves Klein bathed in wall-projector blue; or Paul Elliman’s talk on fireworks with simultaneous demonstration and Chinese translation … all seemed to share a similar explosive release.

Which brings me to anticipate various forces at play behind the next, TOURETTE’S V, another event, this time at Tate. I’d say our current interests are three-fold: The first relates to conversation, and this goes back at least as far as your paraphrasing John Cage: ‘A real conversation is when you don’t know what the other person is going to say.’ Since our adolescent yammering, then working-apart-together, it’s seemed necessary to set up these admittedly contrived conditions for a ‘real’ conversation because (a) we now live on opposite sides of the world, slaves to the disorienting time- and energy-lags of email, and (b) to override the fact that communication among colleagues is increasingly paranoid, or poisoned by small-talk.

The second is to do with directness. We’ve always discussed a productive balance between clarity and obscurity in our own and others’ work, and I’d say we still err by default on the obscure side. Recently, though, we’ve been sending each other more direct, succinct, even brutal examples of writing which deal explicitly with the social conditions of their immediate past. Which we both wanted to communicate to those closer to home who don’t make up our regular circle – parents and siblings, for example.

And the third is concerned with friendship. Both Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis have appeared more than once in previous TOURETTE’S, and it seems useful to assemble some scaffolding around the fact that Stein’s project was as pertinent for you as Lewis’s was for me. Lewis repeatedly attacked Stein’s work in public, and her response was silence, a refusal to acknowledge why Lewis set himself up as ‘The Enemy’: with the idea that friends, being friends, are reluctant to upset you, and adjust the truth of their perceptions accordingly. In which case only enemies are truly to be trusted. *Et tu?*

Stuart

Dear Stuart,

Very telling that, towards the end of your letter you allow Gerty and Wyndy to enter stage like Mr and Mrs Punch. (By the way, did you know that *Piesc* – the General, in Stefan Themerson’s story, who only finds happiness when he has forgotten his mission – is pronounced ‘punch’ and means ‘fist’ in Polish?) You then introduce notions of friends and enemies, and that friends are people who would never want to upset or confuse you, and ‘adjust the truth of their perceptions’ in order to keep the peace. As you know, I feel that Wyndham Lewis’s necessary ‘Enemy’ in society is a typical 20th-century idea of what it means to be ‘avant garde’: over-exerting oneself in order to demonstratively destroy the previous generation’s idea of progress (killing one’s father), in order to secure one’s own definition of progress.

In a recent interview that became more of a conversation, Vanessa Desclaux asked me how I saw my (and our) work in relation to friendship, and pulled in Hélène Cixous by the hair (a close reader and friend of Jacques Derrida), who, on first reading, would seem to agree with the enemy-as-best-friend idea: someone who wants to halt your progress, arrest your development, and force you back into that insecure childish state of not-knowing-for-sure. Imagine finding a large black monolith in the middle of your garden path, stopping you from getting to work, and this being so demanding that you need to take a day off to understand why it's there. I'm not sure if this is as generous as Gertrude Stein's silence towards Wyndham Lewis, but I *am* sure that the generosity is extended through her writing not pointing directly at something we all take for granted: that if you say 'apple' you mean 'the round fruit of the tree of the rose family, which typically has thin red or green skin and crisp flesh.'

Stein is often accused of being repetitive (a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose), or in Lewis's words, 'This child throws big, heavy words up and catches them; or letting them slip through its fingers, they break in pieces; and down it squats with a grunt, and begins sticking them together again. Else this far-too-intellectual infant chases the chosen word, like a moth, through many pages, worrying the delicate life out of it.'[60]

I would sooner say that this child is intensely observing the nature of each word by allowing it to be repeated within slightly different instances. Her care for the chosen word is demonstrated by her progressive use of it, observing how it becomes something else, putting it into new situations so its potential can be demonstrated. I can't imagine a word being 'worried' by her overuse, I'd sooner say it must be happy to be that alive. A friend reminded me that human beings only use about 20% of the brain's potential capacity. Perhaps this is a better way of explaining how Stein wishes to extend the potential of language beyond its accepted capacities. Would you say her treatment and intentions are enemy or friend to the use of language? Is it friendly to spare people the use of their brains?

If we repeat a word often enough, it becomes meaningless. Write 'apple' down a hundred times and you won't recognise it any more but you *will* be aware of it being unrecognisable. Couldn't we then consider words not as signs meant to be read-through (as invisible 'carriers' of meaning), but as signs which stop the reading-through, in which reading becomes a stuttering inquiry into *why* text is on a page in the first place? John Cage said something like 'a true friend is someone who confuses you', and someone told me recently that the idea of a relationship is when you 'know' somebody. Not read through them to something beyond them that says 'mother', 'friend', 'wife' or 'girlfriend'. Such knowledge does not have labels, and is the essence of friendship: allowing the other to be introduced to a blockage. A true friend will stop to get to know the blockage, most other people-on-a-mission will not want to spend time with it. Doesn't this have to do with what you nicely referred to as the cybernetics of conversation?

Will

Will,

While Stein remained silent, Virginia Woolf *did* respond to one of Lewis's punches with a kind of friendly exasperation: 'for God's sake don't try to bend my writing one way or the other' – but it seems to me this was Lewis's unapologetic point, bending other people's stuff to fit his various arguments, repurposing it to stake his own philosophical claims: 'As to the *unimportance* of those I have chosen for attack … Well, in themselves, most of these "enemies" are, of the most perfect unimportance. But they are rather *ideas* than people … the names of notions, associated with other (and far more powerful) notions. In the influence they exert it would be foolish to deny their "importance".'[61]

[60] Wyndham Lewis, 'The Prose-Song of Gertrude Stein', *The Enemy*, no. 1 [1927] (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1994), p. 83.

[61] Wyndham Lewis, 'The Political Philistine', *The Enemy*, no. 3 [1929] (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1994), p. 14.

Lewis's criticisms were concerned with a general drift into what he called 'Time-philosophy', and Stein's writing was merely a literary embodiment of this form of thinking he felt amounted to a kind of cultural brainwashing – one he attempted to reveal and perhaps reverse. Lewis called on her work as evidence for his prosecution, which is why there's always gratitude in his mockery. By his own later reckoning, however, Lewis wrote about things 'which only a handful of people in England know or care about … I might as well have been talking to myself all the time and that's a fact.'[62]

This very self-*awareness* is really Lewis's defining quality, and legacy, for me. He frankly admits his adoption of the 'father-killing Avant-garde persona', but only as one of the many he encouraged ('leave your front door one day as B: the next march down the street as E'[63]). For Lewis, writing was precisely a 'character' that one assumed in justification of one's 'actual' work. He later complained of Stein's refusal to come 'out-of-character' and address her readers in a more conventional voice, detached from that of 'the work'. This was the essence of what he found 'fraudulent' and (to use the current pejorative catchword of U.S. politics) 'elitist' in Stein. I wonder how you feel about this accusation concerning the lack of plain speaking *about* (rather than *within*) her art in such as her 'Composition as Explanation'. How does this square with the 'generosity' you claim for her?

Actually, let me try and anticipate your answer: that it's generous inasmuch as it forces the reader to experience the 'difficulty' of the new form, to work through it, and to 'understand' – feel, appreciate, absorb – by *doing*. This is Calvino's argument in the 'Cybernetics and Ghosts' essay you sent me last week, how the labyrinthine writing of Borges, for example, is deliberately designed to disorient, to lose the reader, in order that their effort of *re*-orientation has its own aesthetic payoff, or as he dramatically describes it, 'a kind of training for survival'. This is more prosaically put in Mancunian by Ryan Gander: 'a work means so much more when you get it yourself, when it's not handed to you on a plate.' Aren't we talking about enlightenment, and about the value of experience over convenience?

In a favourite anecdote of mine, a writer recounts building a puppet theatre for his children in such a way that he can see their faces as they watch the 'stage' – a cardboard box propped up on the back of the couch. During the play's violent climax he clumsily knocks the whole thing over while still watching his children, and notes how their expressions switch from surprise to shock to hilarity as they realise how easily they've been tricked, absorbed into the setup.[64] Lewis called this the realisation of 'the incredible false bottom that underlies every seemingly solid surface'. The father's profound observation, though, is that for the first time observing his own children during this split-second loss of innocence he saw that 'only laughter could steel them in their new awareness.' I wonder how the collapse of the cardboard box frame and narrative puppets on his wrists might relate to Stein's writing. Would you say her famously writing in the 'continuous present' is both at once, a flattening of the division between form and content? And is there anything 'hilarious' about it?

Stuart

Dear Reader,

I hope you're still with us. I had expected Stuart to be wearing his editor's hat: keeping you in mind and correcting our course, which I intentionally deflected with a denser block to demonstrate my point. Remember: I am not the only reader he is writing to.

I will assure you: his natural editing ability is demonstrated best when Stuart speaks, and he seems to be much calmer when he wants to tell you something face to face. I, on the other hand, always want to say too much when speaking publicly, and often make a stammering and fumbling fool of myself.

[62] Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombadiering* [1937], revised edn. (London: Calder, 1982).

[63] Wyndham Lewis, 'Code of a Herdsman', *The Little Review*, vol. 4 no. 3, July 1917.

[64] The full anecdote is told in the middle of §2.3(d).

I can imagine that you understand Wyndham Lewis's changes of character ('blasting' enemies and 'blessing' friends), just as you can appreciate how difficult it must be to only have two hands when articulating the Crocodile, the Policeman, the Butcher, the Baker as well as Mr Punch and Judy. Let alone get all the different voices right. This is something we all do every day, of course: adopt different tones of voice depending on who we're talking to – when ordering your dinner, or asking the newsagent to send you the *Herald Tribune* or *Daily Express* every morning, for example. We're unaware of this very social gesture 99% of the time, but I think it should be pointed out that Wyndham Lewis was certainly 'talking to himself' when he imagined Stein as being unable to adapt her voice: 'She would roll her eyes, squint, point in a frenzy at some object, and, of course, stammer hard. She would play up to the popular ignorance as to the processes by which her picture had been arrived at, in short. She would answer "in character", implying that she was cut off from the rest of the world entirely by an exclusive and peculiar sensibility.'

In fact, one only has to read her *Lectures in America* (1935) to understand that contrary to being 'cut off', Stein was rather pre-occupied with whoever was listening. Her writing displayed a continuous esteem and estimation of this audience, understanding that – much like the activating position of a verb in a sentence – one must change one's case in acknowledgement of the surrounding words. The subtitle of her novel *The Making of Americans … Being a History of a Family's Progress* (1925) can be read as a small model, 99% of which *is*, following Lewis's idea, 'unimportant' to most. However, you *have* to live with that family, become friends and give them your time if you want to understand the 1% that makes them different from their neighbours.

Please note the use of 'different' as opposed to 'better', 'one-up' or 'important'. Understanding that the course of this 'history of a family' depends on every member, then could we say that history *falls out of character*, has no single author, is out of anyone's control.

It seems to me that Stein is attempting to get us to understand that the machine of writing, of recording, is one that needs to be understood in terms of time (at once momentary and infinite) and pushed to its extreme (can it get worse than *Celebrity Big Brother*?) in order to result in a simpler, more human state of correspondence, without the need to name names. The apparent futility of recording the history of *one* family over a thousand pages is more palpably a demonstration of your participation *in* those pages, and how we *are* all oiling – and oil in – the machine. By reducing the machine's components to smaller units (words) that remind us of their flexibility through banal repetition, Stein points out how reading and writing is something we all do with different levels of care – and that these levels can change, according to the optimistic, reductive simplicity of the modernist programme. Or should that be program?

Stuart?

Dear Will,

It seems to me that all our mis-firings during these letters (which don't forget, Dear Reader, have been edited out or at least smartened-up before you read them) prove the point we're flailing to make here. When I haven't followed something you've written, or shared something you assume we've mutually taken for granted, surely the feedback of your realising or my telling as much amounts to those cybernetics of conversation you mentioned, rather than cause for frustration. For example:

I'm with your last letter all the way until the middle of the last paragraph, where I stall, re- and reread, and this time repetition isn't working. By the time you're after 'a simpler, more human state of correspondence', you've (ironically) lost me. So let me try and paraphrase what I think is being said using my clunky abc's, and you can adjust where appropriate.

You're saying the aim is (a) to encourage an audience to participate in reading and speaking that emphasises *how* and *why* things are being said as well as *what*, that (b) this very activity *constitutes* knowledge rather than generates it, and will (c) make for a community that, however local or general, takes better care of what and how they communicate; is in short more *considerate* – in all stuttering nuances of the word. If so, I would certainly agree.

This morning I noticed something I'd overlooked, or maybe avoided, in one of your older letters. I mention it here as a great example of an apparent contradiction that hopefully illustrates (a!) the need for clarity, even over-stating the obvious, because I didn't understand what you were getting at; but then (b!) precisely *because* of this lack of clarity, I went through a little *dis*- and *re*-orientation myself, and having done so, now more clearly understand the 'machine' you write of.

The letter begins with Lewis's portrayal of Stein (negatively) as a child chasing the moth of language, which you then equate with the machine Calvino (positively) writes of. Namely, language as the device which will record: 'Some day then there will be a history of every one and every thing that ever is was or will be …' – a self-stuttering literary device as an end in itself, rather than one that imparts information in a journalistic sense. You add that Lewis probably couldn't, or wouldn't, accept this notion of the machine as metaphor for social construction: the idea that a forced awareness of and sensitivity to the nuts and bolts of a condition (here meaning language, but by implication equally a community or a country) automatically leads to a re-questioning of it.

The other evening another friend was asking me why, if Lewis apparently speaks to my temperament and Stein to yours, I felt the need to ask you to 'explain' Stein to me. This would seem to be the worst kind of didacticism we typically dislike in an institution of the Tate's scale: 'It's on display so it must be good … but tell me (again) why I should appreciate it – ?' But it's precisely because I 'know' you beyond the mere label 'friend' – and because the conversation is difficult and draining if not downright irritating that I suspect something important can be drawn from it. What you say about how calmly I can speak is precisely why I trust there's something I can learn from Stein: as an attempt to evolve.

When speaking 'in public', I'm increasingly conscious of repeating myself to the point where I start to wonder whether I still believe what I'm saying while I'm saying it. This is the same apprehension you describe in relation to Stein: words burnt-out through overuse, with no relation to what might actually cross my mind if I *really* stopped to think. And so I need a tool to unhinge myself.

However, thinking aloud, or attempting to operate on a permanent feedback loop can surely cause both stuttering and insanity, so there has to be some kind of healthier balance. I think it's called 'well-adjusted'. The well-adjusted Gilles Deleuze spoke of his teaching as an immense amount of preparation towards a single (and by no means guaranteed) moment of insight. His lectures wouldn't be planned as such, but rather organised towards the possibility of his students witnessing a thought being formed in front of them, live. Isn't this in line with Stein's (and our) 'continuous present'?

X

## 7.8: SO-CALLED EPHEMERA

This is a transcription of some notes that informed a seminar held the library at the Museum Sztuki in Lodz, Poland, in the context of exhibition *The Themersons and the Avant-Garde*.[65] The group of people was small enough to allow our passing round the various bits and pieces from the museum's Themersons archive as and when they were mentioned – an intimacy that encouraged the sort of up-close scrutiny and careful reading that the talk advertently promotes. By including a second long reflection on the their work (again focused on Stefan in particular), I mean to show how the same principles that inform what would naturally be considered their 'main' body of work find form in equally telling objects at the 'minor' end of the spectrum.

Given the exhibition, I'm assuming we all know by now the considerable extent of the output of Stefan and Franciszka Themerson. But to restate briefly: he was a philosophically inclined writer, she a shrewd artist and graphic designer. He once tried to cheer her with the following telegram:

[65] See fn. 38 above.

> LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL STOP PLEASE ALLOW FEATURES ASSUME EXPRESSION INDICATIVE OF AMUSEMENT JOY PLEASURE BENEVOLENCE ETCETERA BY DRAWING UP CORNERS OF MOUTH AND GENERALLY RELAXING FACIAL MUSCLES STOP LOVE FOR ALL STEFAN STOP

In Warsaw in the 1930s they worked together on children's books and experimental films before moving to Paris, but were soon forced apart during the War. They eventually reunited and settled in London, where they established their Gaberbocchus Press, an avant-garde publishing imprint that channelled much of their subsequent work.

The modest stack of folders and packets that comprise the Themerson archive here in the museum library are littered with bits of ephemera – the technical term for those miscellaneous pieces of print like announcements, invitations, pamphlets and promotional material that gather in the margins of the so-called real work, meaning the books, films, drawings, paintings, costumes, masks and so forth that are on display a few streets away in the gallery.

As the name suggests, ephemera is designed for – and often on – the spur of the moment. Like a telegram, it isn't really meant to last, so it's somewhat paradoxical that this sort of material has been carefully archived for posterity; thankfully so, as it tells us a lot about the Themersons' attitude and approach – about their pragmatic humour. I want to take a closer look at this ostensibly minor miscellany and think about the ways in which it both feeds and extends their ostensibly major artworks, and vice versa. In fact, I think the distinction is moot, and that it's precisely this lack of distinction that makes their oeuvre all the more convincing.

I often think of the Themersons' output as *publishing in its most exploded sense*. I mean exploded in two fairly distinct senses. First and most obviously, I mean to allude to an expanded idea of what publishing – literally the drive to *make things public* – might mean. So not just (say) magazines and books, or latterly PDFs and websites, but equally readings, performances, films, animations, and indeed talks like the one you're listening to right now.

As for the second, less obvious sense, picture the sort of exploded diagram that portrays the constituent parts of, say, a microwave – the metal casing, spinning tray, fan, plug, and screws – and shows in isometric projection how they all fit together. While you clearly see these separate bits and pieces, you can likely equally still visualise what the appliance looks like when sucked back into its finished whole. I mean to allude, then, to a publishing house for whom house is as pertinent as publishing, one that deems all its component parts equally important, however apparently insignificant or supplementary, yet is equally concerned with the sum of those parts – with *the imprint of the imprint*, so to speak.

Both senses of exploded imply questioning the platitudes of publishing, which is one of the things the Themersons and their Gaberbocchus Press were all about.

In a lecture a couple of years ago I saw the German writer Diedrich Diederichsen speak about the German artist Martin Kippenberger's work in terms of two broken joke structures: first, the endless shaggy dog story that goes on and on without a punchline; and second, the joke that ends with the same punchline repeated over and over again.[66] Kippenberger, he said, similarly conceived his work as an incessant chain, in the sense that each new piece became the premise and excuse to make the next – a painting painted as one of a series to be exhibited in a gallery to be advertised by a poster to be collected into in a book of posters to be announced by a postcard and so on and so on. He also once wrote that he'd rather be a comma than a full stop. Wonderful. According to Diderichsen, this career mechanism conflated both types of broken joke – that's to say, (1) the same generating principle on repeat in order to (2) perpetuate an incessant stream of work. Constituent of this attitude, he continued, Kippenberger worked without any sense of hierarchy between media, so painting and postcard were on equal terms in this unusually 'egalitarian' body of work.

[66] A fuller version is recounted in §2.3(a).

I want to keep this anecdote in mind when looking through the museum's Themerson archive. When the same sensibility plays out in diverse circumstances and multiple media, the character that runs through an accumulating body of work is easier to grasp – especially if we ignore the usual class system of art and artifacts. Its common denominator (essential identity, peculiar charm) is offset in greater relief. Nick Wadley, one of the guardians of the Themerson archive in London, once recalled that when, after having been familiar with Gaberbocchus publications for some time, he finally met the Themersons in person, he was shocked to discover how completely the books' 'personality' mirrored their actual personas. 'Subtle, wise and funny –', he summed up, 'affectionate, ridiculous, merciless and moral.'

I'm well aware that I'll be using the term 'ephemera' very loosely here. There are few anomalies that don't really fall under the technical classification, but then they don't very easily fit into any other category either. I do, however, have a couple of other terms in mind that might help place this stuff in the scheme of things.

The literary theorist Gérard Genette coined the term 'paratext' in the 1980s to refer to those bits of language surrounding – or 'parallel' to – a main text, that serve to *present* it. The paratextual zone, in Genette's words, is one 'not just of transition but of *transaction*' – that is, 'the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the public in the service … of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading – more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies.' This loose definition circumscribes any number of supporting devices within the physical bounds of a book, including the author's name, running heads, contents list, illustrations, footnotes, index, preface, and cover blurb, all of which are sub-classified 'peritextual'. But the concept of paratext also covers material in some way *related* to the text yet published apart from it, at another time or in another place such as biographies, autobiographies, articles and interviews, all of which are called 'epitextual'. In any case, the crux of the definition of a paratext is that it is something outside the main body *that the author has had a role in or otherwise consented to*. It might add sense or authority to the 'main' or 'primary' text, or simply publicize it. With a little artistic license, then, I want to transpose the notion of the paratext as it relates to the text, to the example of Gaberbocchus ephemera as it relates to Gaberbocchus books.

As with a talk I gave here a few months back (i.e. §7.5), because most of work I'm going to talk about is decidedly more Stefan than Franciszka (even though most incorporate her drawings in some form, and were otherwise likely touched by her in one way or other), and because I hate using first names, for the next hour or so my use of 'Themerson' refers to Stefan alone. Please excuse this.

ITEM:



THE GUARDIAN

Woof woof, or who killed Poetry London?

JOHN HALL tries to learn something about a strange animal in the cage of Stefan Themerson

The first example is, then, an *epitextual* newspaper profile of Themerson based on an interview of sorts by a journalist called John Hall, cut from the February 27, 1971 issue of *The Guardian*.[67] It's important to know that Themerson had an extremely low opinion of the biography genre. Once, a fairly close friend and collaborator of his, the typographer Anthony Froshaug, sent along a draft of a brief introduction to Themerson's life and work for his subject's approval, and received this typically curt though not altogether unkind response:

> Mixture of biographic data & personal reminiscences (...) I do not like that kind of literary research which consists in finding bits of author's life & ad hoc connecting them with some bits of his work. It seems to me essentially non-scientific, prejudicial, irrelevant, misleading, & altogether too easy.[68]

Themerson added that he should prefer to learn some irreverent things about a character in one of his novels than some irrelevant things about its author, and elsewhere unequivocally sniffed 'bibliography is my biography'.

I'd go further and suggest that his work in general is so *radically idiosyncratic* as to manifest an equally exceptional degree of personality. Given this disdain for literary biography, it's no surprise to learn that this 'objective' newspaper profile is fraught, caught between Themerson's presumably reluctant consent to a little welcome publicity for the Press, and his reflex refusal to play along with commonplace journalistic formulas. Certainly a conventional advertorial wouldn't do a Gaberbocchus publication justice, and sure enough, Themerson's contrarian attitude yields a markedly odd profile that ends up, against all odds, as sharp and illuminating as any other piece of Gaberbocchus work. His strategy is simply to deflect all of Hall's questions, obliging the interviewer to more or less answer them himself in order to give his readers first some idea about *what* the work is (already no easy task), then *why*.

In fact, the interviewer acquits himself very well, distilling a few of his subject's dense and often obtuse books via a series of well-executed pastiches of Themersonian technique. The piece begins, for instance, with a police-style interrogation, a narrative device that recurs in a number of his subject's novels; then Hall describes him lighting his pipe using Themerson's own technique of Semantic Translation – replacing stock phrases with their full-blown dictionary definitions.[69] Then he gets annoyed:

> Stefan Themerson is a kindly, thoughtful speaker who tends to substitute nodding ruminant smiles for answers, which makes for restful afternoons, but lousy interviews. That is, when you have a preconceived notion of what an interview should be; like for example when you think it might kick off with some reference to the writer's origins and past history. He replies: 'That is not important; what matters is what I am now.' Allowing that this is water under the bridge, might Mr Themerson say what sorts of things he has been attempting to say and do, which have required such a diverse output? (Being the second in a series of preconceived notions about interviews.) Answer: 'That is for you to tell me, because I'm just doing things and I'd like somebody to tell me what I'm doing.' Mr Themerson and I nod and smile ruminantly in unison. OK I give in. How is an interview supposed to run?

Themerson replies:

[67] John Hall, 'Woof woof, or who killed Poetry London?', *The Guardian*, Saturday February 27, 1971.

[68] Themerson quoted in: Kinross: *Anthony Froshaug: Fragments of a Life*, op. cit.

[69] See §7.5 above.

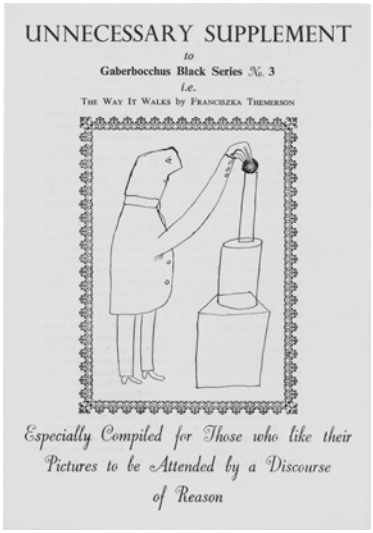
> 'If I wish to learn something about a strange animal, I go along to the zoo and I observe that animal in its cage. But I do not ask for its own observations upon itself ...'

And Hall counters that this particular rhetorical manoeuvre recalls the pedantic deadpan of Themerson's convoluted essay on logic and ethics, *Factor T*, which obliges him to flesh out the reference again. By now the pattern is set, the interviewer writing himself out of the holes left by his subject's non-compliance.

But I don't think Themerson's *simply* being awkward or arrogant. There's a method to his obstreperousness – a generous one, even. The strategy is common to the Gaberbocchus roster: to coax readers, critics and journalists alike into thinking for themselves. This sounds too severe; Gaberbocchus work is on the whole captivating and frequently hilarious – only not straightforwardly so, and not in a necessarily convenient or comfortable way either. Audiences are lured into reorienting themselves and, in the process, get affected. This is how the work happens: connections made, perceptions tilted.

This thinking explicitly informs Gaberbocchus's publishing mandate – to pass on past and present ways of thinking at odds with the mainstream, cajoling their readers into an unusual degree of intellectual investment and involvement to match the Themersons' own. To this end, they were always pointedly provocative. It's apparent even in 'self-portrait' that accompanies Themerson's *Guardian* profile: the camera at arm's length and pointing sharply upwards so he's barely recognizable, subverting the stereotype to the extent that attitude overrides image.

ITEM:




Next I want to quickly show this simple folded sheet that declares itself an 'unnecessary supplement' to a handful of Franciszka's acutely observed cartoons of men interacting with abstract sculptural forms and machines. In case its faux-auxiliary conceit is unclear, a subtitle adds that it has been 'especially compiled for those who like their pictures to be attended by a discourse of reason'. This 'discourse' amounts to a pithy maxim per image, each quoting some kindred spirit and by no means disposable:

> 18. While the old method of presenting truths in the abstract has been falling out of use, there has been a corresponding adoption of the new method of presenting them in the concrete. (Herbert Spencer)
>
> 22. It is a fact that human beings do not solve problems unless they are put to them in a very drastic way. (J.D. Bernal)

The piece is thus only *disguised* as ephemera – its proper place is, in fact, tucked inside the booklet, where it indeed serves to tether Franciszka's ambiguous 'abstractions' to concrete 'meanings' – if the reader is so inclined. Moreover, in emphasizing the *option*, this supplement points out that the drawings can be read in different ways. It's a wry comment on our discomfort with ambiguity, our need for hard meaning. In sum, the leaflet points to its ostensibly secondary status in order to complicate that status.

ITEM:




The next document, *Paper In Action*, is the pilot issue of what seems to have been intended as a biannual bulletin, a proto-advertorial piece of PR issued by a London paper manufacturer in order 'to demonstrate the variety and importance of paper and printing in contemporary society.' Its editor and designer, Herbert Spencer, was an important practitioner and promoter of graphic design in Britain. He edited the celebrated journal *Typographica*, a rare channel of the bookish end of avant-garde, though he was equally well connected with the burgeoning postwar business industry, as this project testifies. Spencer was already a friend and sometime publisher of Themerson, who on his request turned in an essay-of-sorts to accompany a scrapbook array of contemporary printed matter such as tickets, signs and stamps – mostly ephemera, in fact – reproduced in saturated full colour. It begins:

> Imagine a thought. Something one cannot touch with the tip of one's fingers, something one cannot measure, either in inches or in seconds, or put on the kitchen scales, something – one can't even say *where* it is – and yet, in spite of all that, it is enough to take some twenty-six kinds of sticks of metal, arrange them in a specific order, ink their faces and press them to the surface of a sheet of white paper – and hey presto! – the thought has become a sensible fact: the immaterial Lady can be caught by the tail of the Fox into which we have turned her ...

Later, he quotes W. Grey Walter, who, in pointing to the enduring relevance of print in the nascent TV age, anticipates Stiegler's call to maintain culture's 'long circuits':

> Society seemed for a time to reflect in its diversity, plasticity, and adaptability the generosity of the brain function; now it seems to be degenerating into something more like a spinal cord, able to receive instructions and implement reflex coordination but incapable of initiating any independent or original idea. A passive solitary child at the screen of a television receiver amuses only itself – the need

> to gaze does not promote or evoke habits of creativeness or generosity.

The essay is increasingly augmented by these citations, to the extent that it becomes difficult to follow who's speaking. Sure enough, as the essay draws to a close, Themerson acknowledges that copious and conspicuous appropriation seemed the best way to account for the enduring efficacy of the printed word – that it is 'specially suitable for compiling this printed object because it is about other printed objects.'

Themerson worried aloud that future generations of readers might regard Gaberbocchus publications as merely 'historical curiosities'. On the contrary, their mandate was explicit: to perpetuate thinking that *remained timely* or was *newly useful*, whether drawn from the distant or recent past, whether classical Aesop, modern Pol-Dives, or contemporary Queneau. In the essay, Themerson writes: 'Only a few words, joints, are mine … The flesh, bones, glands, arteries, etc. have been vivisected from the printed body of various authors, some dead, some alive.' But his comments amount to more than mere glue – especially this one, on how written language is useful not only for passing on ideas, but equally generating them in the first place:

> Thought not only *lives* on paper by the pen; often, it needs paper and the pen to be created. When you have drawn some co-ordinates, and then, patiently, find a number of relevant points and join them together to create a curve that tells you one thing or another, the fluctuations of the £ or of the sun-spots – you are not yet trying to communicate your thought, you are trying to find what to communicate. And when you write a poem, or prose, and cross some words out, and add new lines, and recross them – it is not always that you do it in order to express better what you want to say; often, you do it because you want to find out what you want to say.

ITEM:

These next two pieces show alternate ways of designing what's basically the same material. Now, as a typography student I frequently worked on projects that involved everyone in the class dealing with the same raw material – same text, same images, same audience, same context – to be turned into the same thing – a plausible timetable or poster or magazine or signage system, whatever. However, recently I've noticed that the design schools seem allergic to this kind of homogeneous class project, which has been usurped by the solipsistic *personal* one. This is unfortunate, because where the group project affords the whole class the considerable benefit of seeing the same thing designed in different ways, the personal project tends, naturally enough, to answer exclusively to itself. In other words, it's conceived in a relative vacuum, which precludes the possibility of observing and speaking together about why certain works worked and others didn't – including debating what 'working' might mean in each new case. Direct comparison affords the opportunity to make work that's more *answerable*.

That said, all I really want to show with these two documents is how, although the same information is rendered in very different ways, both remain entirely *Themersonian*. To reiterate, I'm interested in showing how the *range* of what they produced, even at this micro-level of throwaway matter, allows onlookers like us to grasp its idiosyncratic essence. The two items in question are modest catalogues of Gaberbocchus books that I imagine were intended for prospective readers and booksellers alike.




The first is a pale yellow sheet printed on one side, with the Gaberbocchus inventory turned into a cartoon scroll by Franciszka's familiar line. This list is flanked on the left by a matrix that sorts the roster according to category (art, poetry, humour, drama, fiction, essays, biography and 'varia'), and on the right by the cost of hard and soft cover editions. It's a quietly exemplary instance of information design, articulating a large amount of data in a small space without fuss, and entirely accessible.



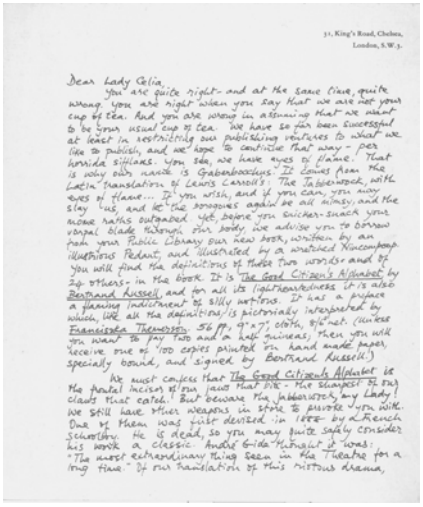




The second is a more conspicuously inventive stack of square slips of thin yellow, pink and white paper, each minutely offset from the last and fixed with a metal rivet, exaggerating its three dimensions – like an axonometric projection of Post-It notes. Most of the squares announce individual books, interspersed with Franciszka's biblio-themed doodles.

The paper mechanics are typical of Gaberbocchus invention. The Press was entirely homegrown, first in the basement of the Themersons' house, then in a building around the corner. Their work thus escaped the standardizing, levelling influence of the regular printing trade; they didn't have to convey their ideas to a third-party via written, graphic or spoken instructions, so nothing could be lost in translation. Rather, stuff was designed reflexively at the source, more or less in view of the technology that was about to reproduce it, a proximity that visibly coaxed and enabled less standard, more ad hoc ways of doing things. Whoever made these modest catalogues evidently had a good time doing so. They carry the same sense of knockabout experiment as the books they advertise – a common character that seems less applied (as we might say of an institutional 'identity' today) than *deposited*; the opposite of contrived, anyway.

ITEM:



31, King's Road, Chelsea,
London, S.W.3.

Dear Lady Celia,
You are quite right - and at the same time, quite wrong. You are right when you say that we are not your cup of tea. And you are wrong in assuming that we want to be your usual cup of tea. We have so far been successful at least in restricting our publishing ventures to what we like to publish, and we hope to continue that way - per horrida silliana. You see, we have eyes to flame. That is why our name is Gaberbocchus. It comes from the Latin translation of Lewis Carroll's The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame... If you wish, and if you can, you may slay us, and let the tenuous again be all misty, and the meme paths outgrabed. Yet before you snicker-snack your vorpal blade through our body, we advise you to borrow from your Public Library our new book, written by an illustrious Pedant, and illustrated by a wretched Nincompoop. You will find the definitions of these two words - and of 24 others - in the book. It is The Good Citizen's Alphabet by Bertrand Russell, and for all its lightheartedness it is also a flaming indictment of silly notions. It has a preface which, like all the definitions, is pictorially interpreted by Franciszka Themerson. 56 pp., 9" x 7", cloth, 8/6 net. (Unless you want to pay two and a half guineas, then you will receive one of 100 copies printed on hand made paper, specially bound, and signed by Bertrand Russell.)
We must confess that The Good Citizen's Alphabet is the fatal incision of you into that pie - the sharpest of the claws that catch. But beware the Jabberwock, my Lady! We still have other weapons in store to provide you with. One of them was first devised in 1888 by a French schoolboy. He is dead, so you may quite safely consider his work a classic. André Gide thought it was: "The most extraordinary thing seen in the Theatre for a long time." If our translation of this virtuous drama,

Themerson has handwritten this next folded flyer, a rejoinder to an apparent letter of complaint from one 'Lady Celia' who asserts that Gaberbocchus books are high-minded, elitist, and generally too arrogantly avant-garde for the common herd.[70] The letter is possibly real, possibly fictional, and I'd guess most likely a composite of the two. In any case, Themerson responds:

> Dear Lady Celia,
>
> You are quite right – and at the same time, quite wrong. You are right when you say that we are not your cup of tea. And you are wrong in assuming that we want to be your usual cup of tea. We have so far been successful at least in restricting our publishing ventures to what we like to publish, and we hope to continue that way ...

To explain the name 'Gaberbocchus', he lapses into Lewis Carrol's nonsense argot Jabberwocky, which leads into another advert:

> Yet before you snicker-snack your vorpal blade through our body, we advise you to borrow from your Public Library our new book, written by an illustrious Pedant, and illustrated by a wretched Nincompoop. You will find the definitions of these two words – and of 24 others – in the book. It is *The Good Citizen's Alphabet* by Bertrand Russell, and for all its lightheartedness it is also a flaming indictment of silly notions. It has a preface which, like all the definitions, is pictorially interpreted by Franciszka Themerson. 56 pp., 9" x 7", cloth, 8/6 net.

The approach is familiar by now: the task turned into a game that generates a useful text – not unlike the challenge he forced on the *Guardian* journalist. Here, Themerson addresses the Lady's complaints with passing reference to as wide a range of Gaberbocchus publications as possible. In this manner he summarizes not only the backlist, but its comic disposition, too, and ends by calling into question *her* prejudices:

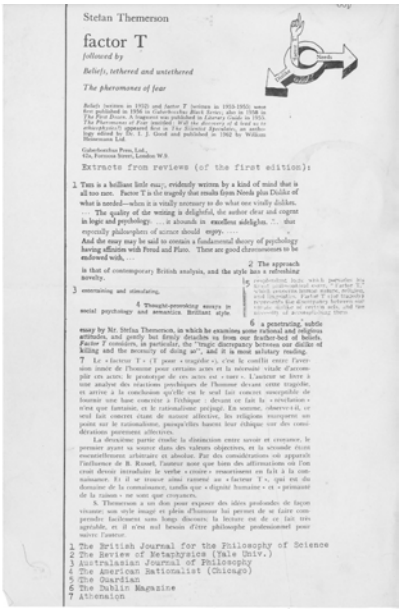
> Perhaps it may be as well to tell you that what we do it is not a millionare's fancy. We are just taking advantage of the freedom provided by the private enterprise that still exists within the

[70] Reproduced actual size as the frontispiece to this chapter.

> publishing world in this country, defying as we can the laws of economics and paying the full price for our barbarous pleasures.

Like the two booklists, the ‘domestic’ style doesn’t comes across as styl*ized* – that’s to say, it doesn’t strain to look amateurish. It simply *is what it is* – a casual, expedient means of advertising the books with a bit of impromptu blurb that reads less like marketing and more a limbering up to write something else.

ITEM:



Stefan Themerson

factor T

*followed by*

*Beliefs, tethered and untethered*

*The pheromones of fear*

Extracts from reviews (of the first edition):

1 Tam is a brilliant little essay, evidently written by a kind of mind that is all too rare. Factor T is the tragedy that results from Needs plus Dislike of what is needed—when it is vitally necessary to do what one vitally dislikes. … The quality of the writing is delightful, the author clear and cogent in logic and psychology. … it abounds in excellent sidelights. … that especially philosophers of science should enjoy. …

And the essay may be said to contain a fundamental theory of psychology having affinities with Freud and Plato. There are good chromosomes to be endowed with, …

2 The approach is that of contemporary British analysis, and the style has a refreshing novelty.

3 entertaining and stimulating,

4 Thought-provoking essays in social psychology and semantics. Brilliant style.

5 a penetrating, subtle essay by Mr. Stefan Themerson, in which he examines some rational and religious attitudes, and gently but firmly detaches us from our feather-bed of beliefs. *Factor T* considers, in particular, the "tragic discrepancy between our dislike of killing and the necessity of doing so", and it is most salutary reading.

6 Le « facteur T » (T pour « tragique »), c'est le conflit entre l'aversion innée de l'homme pour certains actes et la nécessité vitale d'accomplir ces actes; le prototype de ces actes est « tuer ». L'auteur se livre à une analyse des réactions psychiques de l'homme devant cette tragédie, et arrive à la conclusion qu'elle est le seul fait concret susceptible de fournir une base concrète à l'éthique : devant ce fait la « révélation » n'est que fantaisie, et le rationalisme pratiqué. En somme, observe-t-il, ce seul fait concret étant de nature affective, les religions surrepatent un point sur le rationalisme, puisqu'elles basent leur éthique sur des considérations purement affectives.

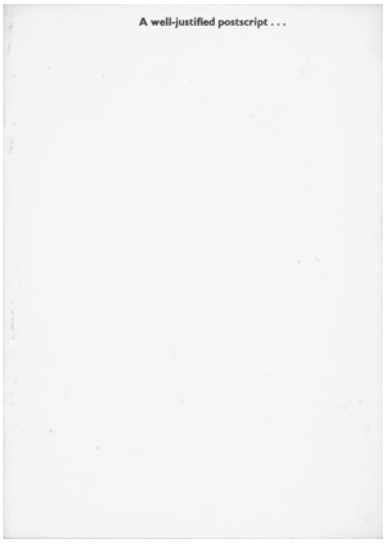
La deuxième partie étudie la distinction entre savoir et croyance. Le premier ayant sa source dans des valeurs objectives, et la seconde étant essentiellement arbitraire et absolue. Par des considérations où apparaît l'influence de B. Russell, l'auteur note que bien des affirmations où l'on croit devoir introduire le verbe « croire » ressortissent en fait à la connaissance. Et il se trouve ainsi ramener au « facteur T », qui est du domaine de la connaissance, tandis que « dignité humaine » et « primauté de la raison » ne sont que croyances.

7. Themerson a un don pour exposer des idées profondes de façon vivante; son style imagé et plein d'humour lui permet de se faire comprendre facilement sans longs discours; la lecture est de ce fait très agréable, et il n'est nul besoin d'être philosophe professionnel pour suivre l'auteur.

1 The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science
2 The Review of Metaphysics (Yale Univ.)
3 Australasian Journal of Philosophy
4 The American Rationalist (Chicago)
5 The Guardian
6 The Dublin Magazine
7 Athenaion

Here’s a flyer for Themerson’s *Factor T*, visibly patched together from a bunch of different reviews along with a summary cartoon-diagram. Once again it’s plain to see how the particular premise, a collection of clippings, suggests a particular form, a collage. The previous item *looked like* a letter from the publisher, which is what it was; this one *looks like* an assembly of others’ opinions, which is what it is. Things being what they are: so-called ephemera.

ITEM:



A well-justified postscript . . .

Themerson reflects on how typography influences reading in this essay with the dual title ‘A well-justified postscript … Topographical Topography’. It’s the last piece in the 1965 *Penrose Annual*, a yearly collection of essays on the graphic arts, once again edited by the ubiquitous Herbert Spencer. The item in question is a complimentary ‘run on’ copy of Themerson’s article, a discrete signature sometimes offered as a courtesy to authors. I mention this only to flag once more the fact that it’s not technically or literally ephemeral, but certainly an orphan format.

The first half of the title is a play on the term ‘justified text’, which is when consecutive lines are forced to correspond in (visual) length by inserting different amounts of space between the words. This results in a squared-up ‘block’ of type. Conversely, in ‘unjustified text’ the spaces between words are all identical and lines left to run their own length. This yields an irregular or ‘ragged’ edge on one side, usually the right – like the text you’re reading right now.

To digress a little, probably the most celebrated and loaded debate in the history of typography is that of symmetrical versus asymmetrical layout, the crux of which is compressed into two articles published a few months apart in a Swiss design journal immediately after the Second World War. The first was a statement by the eminent German typographer Jan Tschichold, followed by a loosely veiled rejoinder by the equally eminent Swiss modernist polymath Max Bill. In the postwar context, their apparently aesthetic argument of minimal consequence was unusually charged with social and ethical implications.

Tschichold was and still is regarded as the godfather of modern typography, largely due to his seminal books *Die Neue Typographie* (1928) and *Typografishce Gestaltung* (1935), which remain the ur-arguments for ‘active’ asymmetry. The premise of asymmetric typography is that texts and images ought not be arranged according to some idea of ‘pleasing composition’ (a ‘classically balanced’ page), but emphatically configured in line with their specific meaning. But Tschichold drifted from his early hardline, and in a 1946 article publicly renounced his earlier pronouncements as too extreme, advocating instead the values of conventional etiquette, balance and order, the essentially ‘passive’ application of a consistent set of principles. Bill, meanwhile, steadfastly renounced such traditional conventions on principle in favour of an approach that coupled Tschichold’s earlier doctrine and technological positivism. Crudely summarized, symmetry capitulated to conventions, while asymmetry demanded a return to zero in each new case.[71]

Although it was never addressed in Tschichold’s early work, the question of justified versus unjustified text can be conceived as something of a distillation of this debate. Justified setting conforms to symmetrical tendencies inasmuch as it forces any text into a classically-established, orthodox frame, while unjustified setting equates with asymmetrical ones inasmuch as it allows text to run its own ‘natural’ course and so determine its own shape. In short, form as *externally applied* versus *intrinsically derived*. As Robin Kinross notes, ‘the social implications are obvious’.

Unjustified setting was the modernist party line on two main counts: it broke from tradition, and it was rational. Contrary to what might be expected from someone wholly aligned with the avant-garde and a rare representative of broadly modernist ideas in Britain, then, Themerson’s ‘well-justified postscript’ sets out actually arguing the case for justification. Crucially, though, his reasoning has nothing to do with abstract principles of balance or geometric order, nor with upholding traditional values, but the far more prosaic fact that conventions are shared codes that can usefully frame the text the reader is about to read. It’s a testament to Themerson’s fiercely independent thinking.

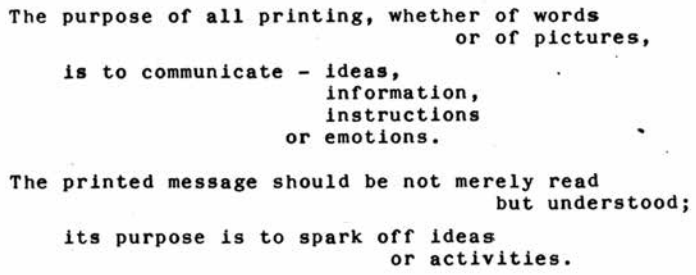
[71] To elaborate the social and ethical implications: for Bill, the set of conventions collected under the awkward shorthand of ‘symmetry’ were analogous to the conservative, traditionalist, decorative and by implication fascist tendencies of Nazi Germany, while ‘asymmetry’ aligned with progressive socialist, positivist attitudes, associated with austerity and renewal. Tschichold, meanwhile, equated asymmetry with the sort of blind ideology proclaimed by such as Bill, which now seemed unacceptably doctrinaire. For him, the all-out push for asymmetry was so blindly authoritarian, and uncritically obsessed with ‘machine aesthetics’ that it obliterated many useful lessons of tradition. Most pertinently, militant modernism disregarded the notion that different kinds of text might require different solutions – some symmetrical, some asymmetrical.

The piece is written as a dialogue. It opens with an apparently autobiographical protagonist opening a book, reading a line, and slamming it shut. A second character, Brutus, asks him why he's so angry:

> 'Because it is prose.'
>
> 'And you expected it to be what? Poetry?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'Why?'
>
> 'Because of its layout. A silly new fashion: *unjustified setting*. I wonder who could justify it.'
>
> 'Surely, this isn't of such great importance ...', he began.
>
> 'It isn't,' I agreed. 'All the same, I'm used to it that, when I open a book, I can tell at once, without reading a word – "O, this is a novel; and that one is a play. Here is pure mathematics and there is a musical score. This is a dictionary, that is a telephone book, and that other one is a volume of poetry." Now because of *unjustified setting* all that is no more possible, something essential has been destroyed.'

The melodrama continues as Themerson's protagonist proclaims, first, that only justified setting affords a page of prose a unique gestalt or 'face' (to the extent that a page of Hemingway is immediately distinct from a page of Proust); second, that justified columns foster easier reading by virtue of being invisible, unlike ragged columns that disruptively draw attention to the structure; and third, that the line ending has always been one of the poet's key 'weapons', the power of which is about to diminish thanks to this recent vogue for ragged lines.

Then again, the story equally illustrates that such conventions can be usefully broken, as its protagonist proceeds to introduce an extreme instance of unjustified setting called 'Internal Vertical Justification', or IVJ, a technique that occasionally crops up in Themerson's wider body of work. IVJ takes the idea of active, asymmetric layout to radical ends. Paragraphs and sentences are no longer merely linear, but reconfigured on two axes in order to emphasize meaning. It is therefore entirely at odds with the premise of justification, which arranges language at the level of the page, i.e., according to some *aesthetic* principle or other. In short, the aesthetics of IVJ derive *from* the semantics of a text. Shorter still: semantics = aesthetics, There's no distinction.




In the second half of the piece Themerson demonstrates IVJ by applying it to a transcription of a speech by the editor, Herbert Spencer himself. And so in this deceptively throwaway 'postscript', Themerson quietly offers a third typographic philosophy: neither wholly symmetrical *nor* asymmetrical, but a considered balance between relative order and relative freedom *according to the particular nature of the particular instance*. He thus projects beyond the binary of the Bill-Tschichold debate.

The point is not that every text is unique and so conventions must be perpetually scrapped, but that every *case involving text* deserves fresh consideration because each specific situation affects *the relative importance* of questions such as justified vs. unjustified setting, or symmetrical vs. asymmetrical layout. Pragmatism trumps ideology: the benefits of conventions, says Themerson, ought to be perpetually weighed against the benefits of breaking them, and neither propounded in the abstract.

Themerson's 'third way' also suggests a social-ethical corollary. Robin Kinross once described publishing as 'a social act that provides a forum for dialogue and exchange'. It therefore follows that 'making text deliberately hard to read is … a public offence'. With this in mind, he goes on, the freedom and order of an otherwise modest, well-designed page can be conceived of as 'a model for social arrangements too.'[72]

A few other aspects are worth noting. First, in typically writing up his thoughts in the form of a goofy dialogue, he emphasizes such questions *should always be debatable* – a conversation with oneself, a client, an audience, or whomever else is usefully at hand. Next, in creating a character who takes his typography far too seriously, the author shows he doesn't take *himself* too seriously. Lastly, the real postscript here is that *nothing is sacred*, conditions are always prone to change, new axes are always opening up; when they do, perspectives and requirements change too. This last point is succinctly made at the end of the article when the protagonist casually lets slip that his interlocutor, Brutus, is in fact a talking dog.

ITEM:




This final piece qualifies as ephemeral in the sense that it appears to be a working proof – there are a couple of unfolded sheets in the archive – of something Themerson made together with the typographer Anthony Froshaug. It's a 'prospectus' (a sample, a teaser) of a 'Semantic Sonata' written by Themerson and printed letterpress by Froshaug according to those aforementioned principles of Internal Vertical Justification.

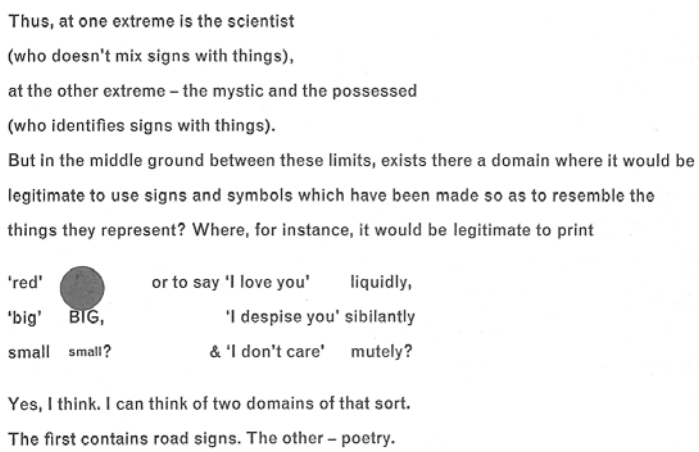
In fact, the two first met when Froshaug was curious about an IVJ section of one of Themerson's pieces of writing published in Polish. Not speaking the language, Froshaug was unable to comprehend the meaning that appeared to dictate the arrangement, so the two translated it together, stacking possible words on top of each other. Later they worked on this 'Semantic Sonata' in tandem. At the time, Froshaug was living in austere conditions in Cornwall, exploring the possibilities afforded by the extreme limits of a small hand-operated press. Where Themerson was interested in exploding

[72] Kinross, 'Let the Object *Speak*', op. cit., p. 33.

paragraphs and sentences, then sticking them back together so as to emphasize their internal relationships, Froshaug was engaged in a similarly elemental, back-to-basics investigation of printing, and the way Themerson was dissembling language was mirrored in the obstinate materiality of moveable metal type. Arranging the Sonata's uncommonly large and varying indents would involve an equally unorthodox use of the press, so language was being radically re-assembled in physical as well as conceptual terms.

Back in that piece we looked at called *Paper in Action*, Themerson noted how contemporary philosophers are interested in the idea that the pattern of language 'reflects the relationships that are in the world, and therefore [that] the study of the pattern can tell us something about the world.' Out on a limb with few clear precedents, aesthetic adventures such as the 'Semantic Sonata' suggest a further analogy with social organization – the theoretical ease and practical difficulty of conceiving newly meaningful arrangements.

ITEM:


Thus, at one extreme is the scientist
(who doesn't mix signs with things),
at the other extreme – the mystic and the possessed
(who identifies signs with things).
But in the middle ground between these limits, exists there a domain where it would be
legitimate to use signs and symbols which have been made so as to resemble the
things they represent? Where, for instance, it would be legitimate to print

'red' or to say 'I love you' liquidly,
'big' BIG, 'I despise you' sibilantly
small small? & 'I don't care' mutely?

Yes, I think. I can think of two domains of that sort.
The first contains road signs. The other – poetry.

Here's a bonus discovery I'm repurposing as a full stop. It's a detail from the Gaberbocchus-published version of Themerson's essay on 'Apollinaire's Lyrical Ideograms'. It focuses on how the French poet forged unusually symbiotic relationships between words and the things or ideas they represent.
To introduce the idea, Themerson replaces the word 'red' with a small red sticker. It's a lovely gesture that marks a quality common to all his work that I've alluded to a few times here; namely, the idea of things *being themselves* – without excess or mediation. This is the best place to glimpse the nature of that social and ethical orientation.

It was already evident in the Themersons' earliest work together in Warsaw in the 1930s, first producing photograms, then the films they conceived as moving photograms. A photogram is a print made by direct contact, which means:

```
It doesn't represent anything.
It doesn't abstract from anything.
It is just what it is.
It is reality itself.[73]
```

The same drive underpins Semantic Translation, Themerson's satirical method of supplanting worn-out clichés with their equivalent dictionary definitions.

In conclusion, whether visually or linguistically, earnestly or sardonically, Themerson is always out to convey the unmediated truth of a situation. This might sound strangely inflated in view of the sort of

[73] Stefan Themerson, *The Urge to Create Visions* (London: Gaberbocchus, 1983), p. 57.

close reading and looking we've been concerned with here; but if you take a relative 'untruth' to mean the sort of total mediation we reflexively associate with today's advertising, marketing and propaganda, the ethos that's channelled through the long circuit of the Gaberbocchus Press remains wholly pertinent for contemporary artists, designers, writers, and hybrids.

The most apposite word to describe the Themersons' work, from enduring art to throwaway ephemera, is a compliment that sounds like an insult: *artless*.

In conclusion:

Spoken or written languages are less vague than visual ones for two obvious reasons: first, more people use them; second, because of this, they are based on relatively definite, fixed (i.e. *widely shared)* meanings. Relative, that is, to the equivalent meanings of the supposed 'languages' of, say, brushstrokes or colours or styles or framing devices. In other words, to the extent that they *can* be conceived as such, visual languages are comparatively ambiguous. Paradoxically, they are easier to justify in the abstract – with words! – and less convincing in practice.

The particular power of the work recounted in this chapter lies in the fact that its makers are unusually unafraid of erring on the side of clarity rather than obscurity. They attempt to talk straight, yet are constitutionally incapable of doing so; in which case they twist conventions that don't seem *catalytic* enough to keep up with thought – and this is what keeps the work vital.

In sum, the works recounted in this chapter are model 'articulate products' in the sense that they 'speak for themselves'. Such work has a didactic aspect: it teaches a reader how to read it; this knowledge constitutes a key that can be used to unlock other work; and, inasmuch as that conscientious reader comprehends the mechanics, the whole process potentially teaches them how to do it, too. This is the sense in which this work can be considered generous and constructive. As Walter Benjamin says:

> *An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one.* What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of a production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.[74]

[74] Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', op. cit., p. 233.




Dexter Sinister, *'Identity'*, 2012, installation view of three-screen projection (using Meta-The Difference-Between-The-Two-Font) at Artists Space, New York

# 8: META-THE-DIFFERENCE-BETWEEN-THE-TWO-FONTS AND 'IDENTITY'

This practice chapter comprises two distinct projects rooted in the history of graphic design, explored via contemporary software programming and animation.

The first, concerned with a very particular font, is made up of three discrete but complexly entwined essays, 'A Note on the Type', 'Letter & Spirit', and 'A Note on the Time', all written in the name of Dexter Sinister.[1] The first two are concerned with a piece of software we developed in tandem with the writing.[2] The whole thing is based on Metafont, a largely forgotten typographic experiment instigated by computer scientist Donald Knuth in the late 1970s. Knuth was interested in developing not a single font or a family of fonts, but a set of 'meta' parameters that could be tweaked to generate an endless number of letterforms. The third essay falls in the line with the others inasmuch as it was adapted into a license to allow Kadist Art Foundation to employ one iteration of our development of Knuth's project. These three essays are even more promiscuous and palimpsestuous than the other Dexter Sinister projects recounted elsewhere; the genealogy of each is recounted in the footnotes.

## 8.1: A GOOD IDEA IN ADVANCE OF ITS REALISATION

The first piece, 'Note on the Type', for example, is one version of a text that has sprawled all over the place, published in at least eight different places, on walls as well as pages, with the basic template amended according to each new format and context. Fundamentally, it tells the story of our updated version of Knuth's Metafont, called Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font (MTDBT2F), a project we conceived more as an excuse to think about and around the implications of Knuth's work then and now, than to make a 'working font' per se.

The story begins with Knuth's dissatisfaction with the crude standard of the typesetting technology used to set his own published articles. Being a computer scientist, he resolved to develop a better alternative. This turned into a mammoth project that resulted in TeX (pronounced 'tek'), a sophisticated system still used by many academic communities today. Most commercial software today uses what's known as a WYSIWYG interface. This stands for What You See Is What You Get: if I select a bit of text and make it *italic* or **bold** or a different font, the formatting is immediately apparent on my monitor. Knuth's TeX is based on an earlier paradigm, WYSIWYM, or What You See Is What You *Mean*. This involves attaching bits of code to my 'raw' text as I type, to be processed into the visual result at a later stage, so there's a procedural division between the idea and its actualization, between labour and product.

Metafont was originally conceived as a component aspect of TeX, a program that generated the typefaces to be configured by the master application, but Knuth developed it as a discrete piece of software too. But I'm already trespassing on the upcoming essay, so I'll stop this story here for now.

In early 2010, we began to develop a new version of Metafont based on what scant information we could find out about the original work. The aim was to write a program that would generate endless PostScript fonts – the current standard protocol – using Knuth's original parameters; and we found a fitting excuse to do so in the form of an exhibition, *The Curse of Bigness*, at the Queen's Museum in New York.[3] This was a group show comprising artworks that, in various ways, modelled larger social, political and economic systems. The title is borrowed from a book by the show's mascot, Louis

[1] Of the many bits and pieces of texts by 'Dexter Sinister' included before and after this chapter, it's fair to say that all were written and edited equally by the two of us (or at least, it was both difficult and unnecessary to recall who'd done what, exactly, at the point of publication). It's necessary to state that this rule holds less here. Although there was still a *lot* of back and forth, the two 'Notes' were predominantly written by David, and 'Letter & Spirit' predominantly by myself (the first drafts, anyway). It seems imperative to include the whole set here for reasons I hope will become obvious.

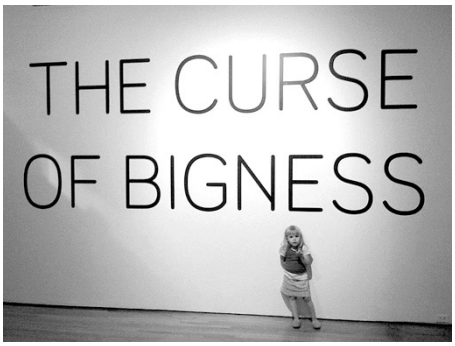
[2] And the 'we' here is wholly misleading: without exception, all the programming was and is exclusively done by David.

[3] *The Curse of Bigness*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 16 May – 3 October, 2010.

Brandeis. Brandeis was a respected U.S. supreme court judge with a righteous reputation as a 'trust-buster': he worked to minimize the destructive tendencies of outsize corporations and governments in the decades before and after the Great Depression.

We happened to know from the exhibition's curator, Larissa Harris, that an overhaul of the Museum's shoddy, piecemeal signage system was long overdue. We proposed to refurbish it using our as-yet-undeveloped Metafont update, with one foot in and one foot out of the exhibition. We would develop it as a 'piece of work' under the umbrella of *The Curse of Bigness* (and so funded by its budget), but then to remain indefinitely in place after the show closed. As the project developed, we further proposed to 'caption' the new signs – to be applied in black vinyl on the walls – with an extended piece of writing. This 'note on the type' would relate the font's backstory, along with our particular interest in resuscitating it now in relation to the show's overarching theme. We initially conceived of this as a modest booklet, available to take away from the show itself.

But this idea expanded too. Alongside the signage, we ended up compiling, editing and publishing not just the intended caption, but an entire book – a primer on the idea and legacy of 'the curse of bigness' assembled from a handful of essays that Larissa had initially passed on as background reading.[4]
We typeset the essays with Knuth's TeX system, using its default font Computer Modern. Then we added our own extremely distilled versions of each essay – flash summaries – set in the same update of Metafont developed for the walls. The book was therefore designed to be both read *and* looked at, without prioritizing one or the other. Our first version of 'A Note on the Type' became the last piece in the book, its supplementary relation to the other texts identical to that of the book relative to the show.






These are our pages from that book:

[4] Harris, ed., *The Curse of Bigness*, op. cit.

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

WEIGHT = 100, SLANT = 0, SUPERNESS = 0.75, CURLYNESS = 0:

Much of this book was set in Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font, a typeface designed by Dexter Sinister in 2010 and derived using MetaFont, the now-thirty-year-old computer typography system programmed by Donald Knuth in 1979.

MetaFont is both a programming language and its own interpreter, a swift trick where it both provides a vocabulary and decodes its syntax back to the native binary machine language of 1s and 0s. Knuth originally intended MetaFont as a helper application for TeX, the computer typesetting system he created to facilitate high-quality typography directly by authors. Donald Knuth, a Stanford professor and author of the multi-volume computer science "Bible" The Art of Computer Programming (1971), was dismayed on receiving galley proofs for the second edition of his book. The publisher had just switched from traditional hot metal typesetting to a digital system and the typographic quality was far worse than the original 1971 edition. Knuth figured that setting letters on a page was simply a matter of ink or no-ink, on or off, 1 or 0, and therefore a perfect problem for the computer. He planned on spending a six-month sabbatical writing a typesetting program and produced (almost 10 years later) the near-ubiquitous (in mathematics and science publishing, anyway) computer typesetting program, TeX. MetaFont was designed from the start as TeX's manual assistant and faithful servant, producing as required, the high-quality fonts at whatever size and shape on-command.

MetaFont was also intended as a tool for designing

new typefaces on its own. As MetaFont was programmed by Knuth, a mathematician, the resulting typographic design method relies on equations (multi-variable algebra and a bit of vector arithmatic) to specify letterforms and computer code to compile these instructions into a useable font — all of which is more the native province of mathematicians than type designers.

In the American Mathematical Society's prestigious Josiah Willard Gibbs Lecture of July 4, 1978, Knuth gave a talk titled "Mathematical Typography," and suggested that, "We may conclude that a mathematical approach to the design of alphabets does not eliminate the artists who have been doing the job for so many years." True enough, but the relatively steep technical slope of using MetaFont for type designers combined with the limited interest in making typefaces by mathematicians has resulted in only several handfuls of MetaFonts being produced over the last thirty years. As such, scant documentation and support exists for someone trying to create a MetaFont today.

OK, let's change the parameters of what you have been reading by setting this brief excerpt from Tom McCarthy's novel Remainder (2005) in Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font with WEIGHT = 26, SLANT = 0.3, SUPERNESS = 0.7, CURLYNESS = 20. Like so:

> *Moving across the landing and down the staircase, I felt like an astronaut taking his first steps — humanity's first steps — across the surface of a previously untouched planet. I'd walked over this stretch a hundred times before, of course — but it had been different then, just a floor: now it was fired up, silently zinging with significance. Held beneath a light coat of sandy dust*

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

*within a solid gel of tar, the flecks of gold and silver in the granite seemed to emit a kind of charge, as invisible as natural radiation — and just as potent. The non-ferrous-metal banisters and the silk-black wooden rail above them glowed with a dark, unearthly energy that took up the floor's diminished sheen and multiplied its dark intensity. I turned the first corner, glancing through its window as I moved: light from the courtyard bent as it approached me; a long, thin kink travelled across the surface of the facing building, then shot off away to wrinkle more remote, outlying spaces. The red rooftiles were disappearing as I came down, eclipsed by their own underhang as the angle between us widened. Then I turned again and the whole facade revolved away from me.*

*I continued down the stairs. Sounds travelled to me — but these, too, were subject to anomalies of physics, to interference and distortion. The pianist's music ran, snagged and looped back on itself, first slowing down then speeding up. The static crackle of the liver broke across the orphaned signals cast adrift from radios and television sets. The Hoover moaned on, sucking matter up into its vacuum. I could hear the motorbike enthusiast clanging down in the courtyard, banging at a nut to loosen it. The clanging echoed off the facing building, the clangs reaching me as echoes almost coinciding with the clangs coming straight up from his banging — almost but not quite. I remembered seeing a boy once kicking a football against a wall, the distance between him and the wall setting up the same delay, the same near overlap. I couldn't remember where, though.*

*I moved on down the staircase. As I came within*

*four steps of the fifth-floor landing I heard the liver lady's locks jiggle and click. Then her door opened and she moved out slowly, holding a small rubbish bag. She was wearing a light-blue cardigan; her hair was wrapped up in a headscarf a few white, wiry strands were sprouting from its edges, standing out above her forehead like thin, sculpted snakes. She shuffled forward in her doorway; then she stooped to set her bag down, holding her left hand to her back as she did this. She set the bag down carefully — then paused and, still stooped, turned her head to look up at me.*

*We'd spent ages practising this moment. I'd showed her exactly how to stoop: the inclination of the shoulders, the path slowly carved through the air by her right hand as it led the bag round her legs and down to the ground (I'd told her to picture the route supporting arms on old gramophone players take, first across and then down), the way her left hand rested on her lower back above the hip, the middle finger pointing straight at the ground. We'd got all this down to a T — we hadn't succeeded in working out the words she'd say to me. I'd racked my brains, but the exact line had never come, any more than the concierge's face had. Rather than forcing it — or, worse, just making any old phrase up — I'd decided to let her come up with a phrase. I'd told her not to concoct a sentence in advance, but rather to wait till the moment when I passed her on the staircase in the actual reenactment — the moment we were in right now — and to voice the words that sprung to mind just then. She did this now. Still stooped, her face turned towards mine, she released her grip on the bag and said:*

*"Harder and harder to lift up."*

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

Unlike more common computer outline font formats such as TrueType or Postscript Type 1, a MetaFont font is constructed of strokes drawn with set-width pens. Instead of describing the outline of the character directly by drawing each letter shape inside and outside, counter and letterform, a MetaFont file describes only the basic pen path or skeleton letter. Perhaps better imagined as the ghost that comes in advance of a particular lettershape, a MetaFont character is defined only by a set of equations rather than hard-coded coordinates and outline shapes. So it is then possible to treat parameters such as aspect ratio, slant, stroke width, serif size, (curlyness!?) and so on as abstracted input values that can change in each glyph definition, creating not a set of set letters, but instead a set of set parameters, any of which can be changed each time the font is rendered. By changing the value at one location in the MetaFont file, a consistent change is produced throughout the entire font. The resulting collection of glyph definitions and input parameters is not then a single font, but instead, a meta-font.

Let's try that again . . . You may recall from earlier that MetaFont is both a language and its own interpreter. (What does that mean?) Taking a clue from that riddle, we could turn MetaFont's name back on itself, by taking it apart, beginning with the end — "font."

"Font" is a word whose current common usage (particularly in the context of personal computers) has twisted its exact definition. Returning to its roots, a "font" is simply a collection of characters of one particular design, or precisely, typeface. More specifically a "font" is the particular realization of a certain typeface in a certain medium, according to certain parameters such as size, width, weight, style, contrast and shape — for example,

a font of William Caslon's letters cast in hot lead at 14 points or a font of Standard Grotesque at 96 points made in oak or even a full font of 12 pixel letters stretched 150% and rendered on a 72-dpi screen from the Arial typeface. However this collection of parameters (size, width, weight, etc.) according to which a font is rendered from a particular typeface are not fixed. New parameters can be added at will and this is where the "Meta" of MetaFont begins.

"Meta-" is a prefix of Greek origin that originally simply meant "after", but due to a strange turn of events* came to mean "of a higher order, beyond" in Latin and later modern languages (excluding Greek where it retains its original meaning.)

> * Yes, it's current use as "of a higher order" is due to Aristotle's book on the Metaphysics, but he would never have called it that. Aristotle would refer to the subject of that book as First Philosophy or Theology. The title "Metaphysics" comes from Andronicus of Rhodes (1st century BC), who was the first editor of Aristotle and placed the book on the Metaphysics after the book on the Physics in his compilation (so, it was quite literally "after" the Physics). Best regards, Derek

So then you have metalanguages (languages used to describe languages), metahistory (the study of how people view and study history), metatheorems (theorems about theorems), metarules (rules about rules) etc. Indeed you can "meta" just about anything.**

> ** Wait, are you guys really calling it "Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font"? Sorry man . . .

it's a bad name, but you'll soon realize that yourselves. I won't press. I'll just wait around 'till you see it.

Let's try another version, demonstrated by typesetting an excerpt from The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1842) with WEIGHT = 25, SLANT = -0.3, SUPERNESS = 0.7, CURLYNESS = 0:

As our thoughts repose again, after this interruption, we find ourselves gazing up at the leaves, and comparing their different aspect, the beautiful diversity of green, as the sun is diffused through them as a medium, or reflected from their glossy surface. You see, too, here and there, dead and leafless branches, which you had no more been aware of before, than if they had assumed this old and dry decay since you sat down upon the bank. Look at our feet, and here likewise are objects as good as new. There are two little round white fungi, which probably sprang from the ground in the course of last night, curious productions of the mushroom tribe, and which, by and by, will be those little things with smoke in them, which children call puff-balls. Is there nothing else? Yes, here is a whole colony of little ant-hills, a real village of them; they are small round hillocks, framed of minute particles of gravel, with an entrance in the centre; and through some of them blades of grass or small shrubs have sprouted up, producing an effect not unlike that of trees overshadowing a homestead. Here is a type of domestic industry, — perhaps, too, something of municipal institutions, — perhaps, likewise, (who knows?) the very model of a community, which Fourierites and

others are stumbling in pursuit of. Possibly the student of such philosophies should go to the ant, and find that nature has given him his lesson there. Meantime, like a malevolent genius, I drop a few grains of sand into the entrance of one of their dwellings, and thus quite obliterate it. And, behold! here comes one of the inhabitants, who has been abroad upon some public or private business, or perhaps to enjoy a fantastic walk, — and cannot any longer find his own door — what surprise, what hurry, what confusion of mind, are expressed in his movement! How inexplicable to him must be the agency which has effected this mischief! The incident will probably be long remembered in the annals of the ant colony, and be talked of in the winter days, when they are making merry over their hoarded provisions.

But come, it is time to move. The sun has shifted his position, and has found a vacant space through the branches, by means of which he levels his rays full upon our heads. Yet now, as we arise, a cloud has come across him, and makes everything gently sombre in an instant. Many clouds, voluminous and heavy, are scattered about the sky, like the shattered ruins of a dreamer's Utopia. But we will not send our thoughts thitherward now, nor take one of them into our present observations. The clouds of any one day are material enough, of themselves, for the observation of either an idle man or a philosopher. And now, how narrow, scanty, and meagre is this record of observation, compared with the immensity that was to be observed, within the bounds that we prescribed ourselves! How shallow and small a stream of thought, too, — of

> distinct and expressed thought, — compared with the broad tide of dim emotions, ideas, associations, which were flowing through the haunted regions of imagination, intellect, and sentiment; sometimes excited by what was around us; sometimes with no perceptible connection with them. When we see how little we can express, it is a wonder that any one ever takes up a pen a second time.

In 2009, The New Yorker ran "The Unfinished," a piece about American writer David Foster Wallace following his death six months previous. Midway through the tribute, D.T. Max quotes from an early letter that Wallace sent to Gerald Howard of Penguin Books, in which he explains that his work is neither primarily "realism" nor "metafiction," but rather, "if it's anything, it's meta-the-difference-between-the-two."

Typically it's a throwaway line that returns, then stays with you. Does the "difference" here refer to a mathematical distinction in quantity, or to a more common sense of distinction or dissimilarity (or even disagreement?) Or both? Wallace's chain-of-words is as slippery as the logically-recursive sentence "The first rule is: there are no rules," but with a difference. Instead of simply setting up an endless loop between two poles, it observes that loop from a higher point of concentrated disinterest. There's no simple way out of this one, and yet there seems to be just enough there to keep trying.***

> *** Zadie Smith makes a case for this in an essay on Foster Wallace, using his short story "Depressed Person" from Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

> as arch example: "The effect on the reader is powerful, unpleasant. Quite apart from being forced to share one's own mental space with the depressed person's infinitely dismal consciousness, to read those spiral sentences is to experience that dread of circularity embedded in the old joke about recursion (to understand recursion you must first understand recursion)."

To export Wallace's chain from literature to a more general use, we could plug other values into the equation. For "realism" we could insert "practice" and for "metafiction" perhaps "theory." (These poles can be endlessly swapped with similarly productive confusion — try "concrete" / "abstract" or "modernism" / "postmodernism.") And yet the "meta-the-difference-between-the-two" between any of these two isn't simply resolved by some alchemical fusion, as in "practice" + "theory" = "praxis," practice informed by theory and vice versa. Less of a compound than an extraction, more a subtraction than an addition, m-t-d-b-t-2 is then actually a skeleton, a script, or a good idea in advance of its realization.

Donald Knuth began his Josiah Gibbs lecture, "Mathematical Typography" with an apology of sorts, saying: "I will be speaking today about work in progress, instead of completed research; this was not my original intention when I chose the subject of this lecture, but the fact is I couldn't get my computer programs working in time." And he continues, "Fortunately it is just as well that I don't have a finished product to describe to you today, because research in mathematics is generally much more interesting while you're doing it than after it's all done."

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font has a similarly incomplete character. As a set of simple letterforms and a collection of meta-design parameters, M-t-d-b-t-2-F will create unending numbers of different fonts from now onwards, always only moving forward and compiling a collection of surface effects onto its essential skeleton to produce a growing family of "hollow" fonts whose forms have more in common with handwriting than they do with hot metal counterpunches (not to mention modern digital fonts.) The clumsy result and its chewy name, Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font, arrives before the effect that is applied to it, returning to a moment before fonts, just before Gutenberg's first black-letter Gothic types attempted to match the scribe's penmanship. At this point, to computer-automate the production of handwritten calligraphy, and to more or less ignore 400 years of typographic tradition, is essentially absurd.

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

One final trial, this time used to set an excerpt from The Ascent, a chapter in Will Self's short story "Scale" (1994) with WEIGHT = 50, SLANT = 0, SUPERNESS = 0.6, CURLYNESS = 0:

> Some of my innovations regarding the new genre of "Motorway Verse" have been poorly received, both by the critics and by the reading public. My claim, that what my motorway verse is trying to do represents a return to the very roots of poetas, an inspired attempt to link modish hermeneutics to the original function of oral literature, has been dismissed SANS PHRASE.
>
> I myself cannot even understand the thrust of this criticism. It seems to me self-evident that the

subconscious apprehension of signs by motorway drivers is exactly analogous to that act whereby the poets of primitive cultures give life, actually breathe reality into the land.

Taking the M40 as an example of this:

> Jnctn 1. Uxbridge. Jnctn 1A. (M25) M4.
> Jnctn 2. Slough A365. No Services.
> On M40 . . .

would be a very believable sample of such a "signing up" of the country. Naturally, in order to understand the somewhat unusual scansion, it is necessary that readers imaginatively place themselves in a figurative car that is actually driving up the aforementioned motorway. Metrical feet are, therefore, to be determined as much by feeling through the pedals the shift from macadamised to concrete surfaces, and by hearing the susurration produced by alterations in the height and material construction of the crash barrier, as by the rhythm of the words themselves.

Furthermore, a motorway verse that attempts to describe the ascent of the Chiltern scarp from the Oxfordshire side will, of course, be profoundly different to one that chronicles the descent from Junction 5 (Stokenchurch) to Junction 6 (Watlington). For example:

> Crawling, crawling, crawling. Crawler Lane
> Slow-slow O'Lorry-o. Lewknor. 50 mph max.
> 11T! Narrow lanes, narrowing, narr-o-wing,
> na-rro-wing.

as opposed to:

F'tum. F'tum. F'tum.
Kerchunk, kerchunk (Wat-ling-ton) . . .

Well, I'm certain no one reading this had any difficulty in divining which was which!

On the Continent they are not afflicted by the resistance to the modern that so entirely characterises English cultural life. In France, "VERS PEAGE" is a well-respected genre, already making its way on to university syllabuses. Indeed I understand that a critical work is soon to be published that concerns itself solely with the semantic incongruities presented by the term "soft vierge."

It has occurred to me that it could be my introduction of motorway symbology itself, as if it were an extension of the conventional alphabet, that has hardened the hearts of these penny-ante time-servers, possessors of tenure (but no grip), and the like. But it seems to me that the white arrow pointing down, obliquely, to the right; the ubiquitous "11T" lane-closing ideogram; the emotive, omega-like, overhead "[X]"; and many many others all have an equal right to be considered capable of meaningful combination with orthodox characters.

On bad days, days when the tedium and obscurity of my life here at Beaconsfield seem almost justified, I am embarrassed to say that I console myself with the thought that there may be some grand conspiracy, taking in critics, publishers, editors and the executives in charge of giant type-founders such as Monotype,

to stop my verse from gaining any success. For, were it to do so, they would have to alter radically the range of typefaces that they provide.

This exhibition book was
co-ordinated by Dexter Sinister and
printed by Linco, Long Island City, Queens
on the occasion of THE CURSE OF BIGNESS,
an exhibition at Queens Museum of Art
organized by Larissa Harris and
opening May 16, 2010.

## 8.2: HOW TO KEEP THINGS MOVING

Through writing and rewriting (and rewriting and rewriting) this 'note', we came to realize that the essential difference between Knuth's Metafont and our update is that we're far less interested in the practical application of an endless variety of fonts than in thinking and writing about and around the idea. The original intentions of Knuth's project remain embedded in MTDBT2F, but secondary to our thinking through their implications today – relative to, say, the perception of time, the vicissitudes of digital technology, and the nature of change generally. MTDBT2F swallows its referent while emphasizing the act and implications of this swallowing, with productive indigestion.

'A Note on the Type' combines two stereotypical forms: the editorial that comments on its own design or redesign; and the 'type specimen' traditionally produced by type foundries to demonstrate the appearance of different typefaces at different sizes, often set in 'filler' text such as the well-known nonsense Latin that begins 'Lorem Ipsum …'. Our narrative is interspersed with three such 'dummy' texts; in this case, though, they are not nonsensical, but chosen to allude to the themes of both the font and the exhibition. The three such fragments in this first version of 'A Note on the Type' are by Tom McCarthy (a scene of re-enactment from his 2005 novel *Reminder*), Nathaniel Hawthorne (on the sensory affect of nature from his 1842 *American Notebooks*), and Will Self (on a satirical form of automated poetry, from the elliptical short story 'Scale' in his 1994 collection *Grey Area*).

Some months after *The Curse of Bigness*, all the above was reconstituted into a solo show called *The Plastic Arts* at a modest university gallery in Chicago.[5] Though the general structure of the 'Note' remained the same, the text was seriously compressed, re-edited for a standing viewer reading from a wall instead of a sitting reader with a book. We took the opportunity to embed new excerpts – in this case a repeated collage of lines from a meditation on 'Habit' by the American pragmatist philosopher William James. His account of the plasticity of the brain was instructively analogous to the font.

> When we look at living creatures from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strikes us is that they are bundles of habits. In wild animals, the usual round of daily behavior seems a necessity implanted at birth; in animals domesticated, and especially in man, it seems, to a great extent, to be the result of education ... The habits to which there is an innate tendency are called *instincts*; some of those due to education would by most persons be called *acts of reason*. It thus appears that habit covers a very large part of life ...[6]

This 'wall essay' was displayed as a series of identically sized blocks of text, along with a few related works.[7] From a distance they looked like a series of light and dark grey paintings, according to the relative weight of the morphing font at any given point.

[5] Dexter Sinister, *The Plastic Arts*, Gallery 400 at the University of Illinois, Chicago, 7 September – 23 October, 2010.

[6] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[7] Such as Philomene Pirecki's *Grey Painting: Text Version 2* (seen in the photograph here), as previously featured on the cover of *Dot Dot Dot* #20 (see the frontispiece of chapter 2).



Since then, ‘A Note on the Type’ has been recycled and reworked a further four times for wall, paper and screen, with new dummy excerpts on each occasion selected relative to the context. The next was also a wall exhibition (based on the Chicago one) alongside another vinyl signage system, this time a temporary one at the Turin art fair Artissima in 2010, with excerpts from three Italians (Bruno Munari, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Umberto Eco) on the grey area between art and design.[8] Another version became the opening piece in the last issue of *Dot Dot Dot* (# 20) the same year, with excerpts from three British cultural critics (Alisdair Gray, Michael Bracewell, Julie Burchill) lamenting the downward spiral of local postwar culture.[9] The following year, a subsequent iteration was published more or less simultaneously in *Afterall* magazine and *Dot Dot Dot*’s successor *Bulletins of the Serving Library* #1, with a sequence of vignettes by Bruno Latour on his ‘matters of concern’, ending on a call for ‘Compositionism’.[10] The most recent version at the time of writing was initially delivered by David as a conference paper in 2012, then collected as part of a related book, *Graphic Design (History in the Making)*, published in 2014, that comes full-circle to the source by integrating an excerpt from Knuth’s original article on Metafont, along with a couple of testy collegial responses.[11]

To give an example of how these dummy excerpts were intended to function: As related in §1.8, much of Latour’s recent writing makes the case that our Enlightenment-based epistemology is still predicated on what he deems pernicious ‘matters of fact’ (i.e. absolutes, certainties, along with the critical project of ‘purifying’ them). Against this way of apprehending and dealing with the world, he posits an alternative perspective of ‘matters of concern’ (i.e. networks, contingencies, and the critical project of ‘mediating’ them).[12] This chimes with the wayward, haphazard ‘concerns’ of MTDBT2F too – proliferating wildly here as a bunch of documents generated over time, a roaming operation that contemplates the backstories, connections, contradictions, vested interests, and real-world contingencies that attach themselves to past, present and future versions of the font. Each new articulation of MTDBT2F adds to this rolling snowball of a project, and this is the sense in which the font can be considered a conduit for thinking as much as (or meta-the-difference-between-this-and) a means of disseminating language.

Further, to convey the extent of the sprawl, a number of closely related yet essentially separate bits of writing have been poured into ‘A Note on the Type’’s graphical-rhetorical template, still typeset in MTDBT2F, yet without any direct reference to it. First was ‘A Note on the T’, an account of an identity-in-progress for The Artists’ Institute in New York, published on a wall in English and an

[8] Dexter Sinister, *A Note on the Signs*, Artissima 17, Turin, 5–7 November, 2010; ‘A Note on the Signs’ [English/Italian], *Palinsesto* (Artissima 17 magazine), 2010.

[9] Dexter Sinister, ‘A Note on the Type’, *Dot Dot Dot* #20, 2010.

[10] Dexter Sinister, ‘A Note on the Type’, *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #1 (Spring 2011); *Afterall*, no. 27, Summer 2011.

[11] Dexter Sinister, ‘A Note on the Type’, *Graphic Design (History in the Making)* (London: Occasional Papers, 2014).

[12] See for example, Bruno Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008).

accompanying book in Italian, as part of the exhibition *Graphic Design Worlds* in Milan, 2011. Then there have been five exclusively page-based variations of a meditation on time and contemporary media titled 'A Note on the Time'. The first was published in the inaugural issue of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*[13] with various excerpts from Pistoletto, Alighiero e Boetti, and Régis Debray. Then it was variously retooled for an issue of *Art Journal*,[14] a bilingual pamphlet in English and Italian released on the occasion of *Alighiero e Boetti Day*, a conference in Turin[15] (all in 2011), and as part of a larger PDF-based publication constituent of the group exhibition *Counter-Production* at Generali Foundation, Vienna (2012).[16] Most recently, it was transfigured into a miniature booklet of 'instructions' for Watch Wyoscan 0.5 Hz, a reverse-engineered Casio digital watch we produced with irregular New York publishing platform Halmos (2013).[17]

## 8.3: OPEN-MINDEDNESS MADE MANIFEST

The second essay proper here, 'Letter & Spirit', is a free-ranging follow-up to 'A Note on the Time'; or rather, just as we eventually conceived of Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font as effectively swallowing Metafont, the sequel *swallows* its prequel. It begins by recounting a philosophical debate between Knuth and a couple of colleagues in the early 1980s, then moves quickly through a prehistory of the drive to rationalize letterforms, and on to some contemporary considerations. It concludes with the proposal to extend MTDBT2F into a fourth dimension by adding a parameter not in Knuth's original set – namely, Time. But again I don't want to overtake the essay up ahead; I'll only note that it's written 'a level up', from 'a higher point of concerted disinterest'.

This time the propellant was another large-scale group exhibition in New York, a half historical, half contemporary survey at MOMA concerned with 'the material qualities of language' under the double title *Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language*.[18] We were invited to contribute in a typically vague way, and up basing the upcoming third issue of our biannual *Bulletins of The Serving Library* journal on the same broad theme in order to serve as a 'catalogue-of-sorts' to the show.[19] As with *The Curse of Bigness*, this exhibition and its attendant pseudo-catalogue seemed an ideal opportunity to apply the 'time' idea while writing about it at the same time.

And so we developed what's essentially an *animated* version of the font to become the medium of what ended up as *Trailer for The Exhibition Catalogue*, a 'moving image' piece hung among the other works in the show's main gallery, essentially advertising the journal/catalogue for sale in the museum's two bookstores. The animation is markedly minimal: lines of the constantly morphing, white-on-black text spell out across the middle of a high-definition wide-screen monitor, then hang for a beat before moving on. The text comprises a 16-and-a-half minute looping series of hysterically compressed summaries of the publication's 13 component essays, the last of which is our 'Letter & Spirit'. Its animated advert runs:

[13] Dexter Sinister, 'A Note on the Time', *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #1, 2011.

[14] Dexter Sinister, 'A Note on the Time', *Art Journal*, Summer 2011.

[15] *Alighiero e Boetti Day*, Auditorium RAI, Turin, Saturday 28 May, 2011.

[16] *Counter-Production*, Generali Foundation, Vienna, 7 September – 16 December, 2012.

[17] See: http://www.halmos.us.com/watchwyoscan.html. The instruction manual is available here: http://www.halmos.us.com/Wyoscan-booklet-pages.pdf.

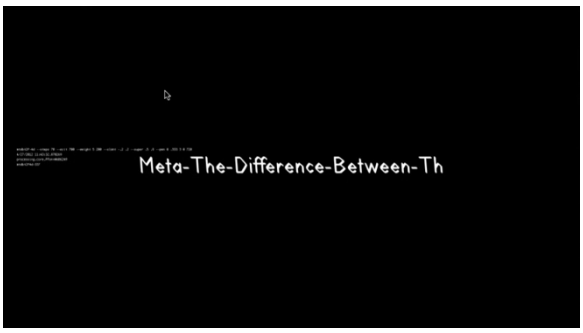
[18] *Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 6 May – 27 August, 2012.

[19] *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #3, 2012.




How to keep things moving?
LETTER & SPIRIT
is the story of the font you're reading right *now*
Its predecessor, called 'Meta-font'
was set up to generate an infinite number of fonts
by tweaking a few simple parameters
at different points in time.
But what if
we make one of those parameters
*time* itself?
Send that point constantly moving
through an imaginary cube
(a 3-dimensional space of possible values)
and as it wanders randomly
it trails a script that renders an alphabet
which morphs according to its current position.
The result is this:
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font-4-D

What's difficult but crucial to explain here is that what you're reading on the screen is *a recording of a computer script processing in realtime*. That's to say, properly speaking the *Trailer* (and the later 'moving image' version of 'Letter & Spirit' that was made in the same way) is not video or film or animation, but a *program* – computer code – in progress. This is made apparent in the *Trailer* itself when, during the line that spells out the font's new, appended name (-4-D), the animation suddenly 'ruptures' as the 'behind-the-scenes', root-level script is shown live-rendering the action above and to the left of the main text for a few seconds.




And here's the full version of the long-form essay as published in the MoMA issue of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*:

In the early 1980s, on the pages of academic design journal *Visible Language*, a classic thesis-antithesis-synthesis played out around the technological and philosophical fine points of computer-assisted type design. Stanford professor Donald Knuth begins with his article, "The Concept of a Meta-font" (Winter 1981). Two years prior, Knuth had conceived and programmed MetaFont—a software that enabled users to generate unlimited numbers of fonts by controlling a limited set of parameters. The article is a performative account of his intervening attempts, using MetaFont to harness the essential "intelligence" of letterforms. In Knuth's view, the way a single letter is drawn—an *a priori* A, say—presupposes and informs all other letters in the same font. This information can be isolated, turned into a set of instructions, and put to work computer-automating the generation of new characters by filling in the features between two or more variables such as weight or slant.

Such intelligence is (and has always been) implicit in any typeface, but Knuth is out to omit all ambiguity and install a more definite system. He acknowledges that this preoccupation with designing meta-level instructions rather than the fonts themselves is typical of the contemporary inclination to view things "from the outside, at a more abstract level, with what we feel is a more mature understanding." From this elevated vantage, MetaFont was set up to oversee "how the letters would change in different circumstances."

A year later, fellow mathematician Douglas Hofstadter responded with his "MetaFont, Metamathematics, and Metaphysics" (Autumn 1982). While "charmed" by Knuth's thesis, and admitting the bias of his own interests in artificial intelligence and aesthetic theory, Hofstadter proceeds to shoot down his colleague's apparent claim that the shape of any given letterform is "mathematically containable." To support his case, he invokes mathematician Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems, which assert that any account of a logically coherent system always contains one root-level instance that cannot itself be contained by that account. Hofstadter's antithesis then usefully couches the debate in terms of "the letter of the law" versus "the spirit of the law," a familiar antinomy that posits an absolute deference to a set of set rules against a consistent-yet-fluid set of principles. Our prevailing legal system is, of course, based on both: judges base their decisions on firmly established precedent, but also map

uncharted territory by bringing the full range of their experience to bear on specific cases "in a remarkably fluid way." In this manner, the law itself adapts.

Hofstadter argues that an accordingly *spirited* conception of type design would therefore renounce Knuth's ur-A-FORM in favor of a yet-higher-level abstraction, an ur-A-ESSENCE; the fundamental difference being that Hofstadter's notion of "intelligence" extends beyond a Platonic shape, allowing for the concept of *what constitutes an A* to change, too— beyond what we can reasonably conceive of this possibly being in the future. Each new instance of an A adds to our general understanding of this idea (and ideal), which is necessarily assembled backwards over time.

Hofstadter includes this illustration of two letters vying for the same "typographic niche," to make himself clear:

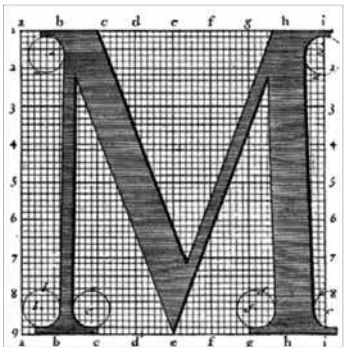



Neatly enough, the following year a linguistics professor called Geoffrey Sampson drafted a brief response to Hofstadter's response to Knuth, titled "Is Roman Type an Open-Ended Question?" (Autumn 1983), which, it turns out, is decidedly rhetorical. Sampson argues that Hofstadter's hairsplitting unfairly and unnecessarily exaggerates Knuth's claims to the point of warping both his meaning and intentions. There is enough metaphysical latitude, the linguist referees, to accommodate both points of view without recourse to the misery of analytical one-upmanship. Sampson's synthesis of letter and spirit contends that it is perfectly reasonable to conceive of letterforms as both a closed system (Knuth's A-shape) AND as an open-ended system (Hofstadter's A-ness).

Relatively speaking, it depends *what you're after.*

. . .

The history of typography is marked by a persistent drive to rationalize. Following the invention of movable type in the mid-15th century, the Renaissance saw several attempts to prescribe the construction of the Roman alphabet: Fra Luca Pacioli's alphabet of perfect relations, Albrecht Dürer's letters of mathematical instructions, and Geoffroy Tory's humanistic rationalizations. These attempts were, however, essentially calligraphic exercises in determining "divine proportions;" the first to apply Enlightenment rationality to properly technical ends was the so-called Romain du Roi, or the "King's Roman." Commissioned by Louis XIV in Paris at the end of the 17th century, it was a typical Age of Reason project—the imposition of a mathematically-rigorous structure on forms that had, until now, developed organically, initially shaped by the human hand (calligraphy, inscriptions, woodcuts) and adapted according to the various demands and opportunities of the printing press and its attendant technologies. Designed by "a royal committee of philosophers and technologists" from the Academy of Sciences, the Romain du Roi was initially plotted on an orthogonal 48 x 48 grid, and a corollary "sloped Roman" italic variant derived by skewing the upright version.



The coordinates were first engraved as a set of instructions, then cut into punches to make metal type, which were to be used exclusively on official or state-approved materials. In this way, the King's letters exerted state power like a great seal or particular signature.



BoTSL#3 2012 MAY 16 7:57 PM

Such ratiocination was revived at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, in line with two of the school's foundational principles set up to meet the demands of industrialization: the omission of ornament and the reduction to geometric elements. The most celebrated outcome was Herbert Bayer's 1925 Universal Alphabet, a pared-down sans-serif comprised exclusively of lower-case characters. Bayer adapted the basic glyphs for typewriter and handwriting, experimented with phonetic alternatives, and proposed a wide family of variants, such as the condensed bold version drawn on this panel:




Alongside the basic character set (minus a presumably redundant o, but with alternatives to a and g, as well as two d's that anticipate lighter weights), Bayer has further abstracted the tools he used to draw it: ruler, T-square, set square, compass and protractor. As such, the drawing captions itself, pointing to its point—that this is a project *intrinsically concerned with a particular mode of construction.*
Around the same time, fellow Bauhausler Josef Albers followed similar principles to slightly different ends with his Stencil Alphabet. This, too, was a single-case font, now entirely configured from ten rudimentary shapes, also typically isolated and presented alongside the assembled letters. Drawn and photographed for exclusive use in the school's own publications and publicity, these elemental Bauhaus fonts remained closeted explorations rather than properly industrial products. Neither was properly developed into a "working" typeface, mass-manufactured in metal for wider use. Outside the school, though, prominent *Werkbunder* Paul Renner toned down the hard geometry with gentler, "humanist" sensibilities—more modulation, less harsh on the eye—to yield



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his commercially successful Futura. When it was issued in 1927, godfather of the nascent "New Typography," Jan Tschichold, wrote that

**it cannot be open to one person to create the letterform of our age, which is something that must be free of personal traces. It will be the work of several people, among whom one will probably find an engineer.**

During the 1930s, British type designer Stanley Morison was in charge of Monotype, the most significant type foundry of the day. Morison was solicited by *The Times.*, London's principal newspaper, to take out a £1,000 full-page ad. Morison responded yes, as long he could typeset the page himself, because the newspaper's existing design was in such a dire state. This conversation reportedly carried itself up the *Times*' chain of command, prompting its director to invite Morison to oversee a complete overhaul of the paper's typography. Morison accepted, again on one condition—that the paper abolish the use of full points after isolated proper nouns, which he (rightly) considered superfluous and a prime example of the sort of typographic depravity he intended to stamp out. The paper removed the offending punctuation, and Morison climbed aboard.

Newspaper typography is a particularly sensitive art. Minute adjustments have critical knock-on effects for the amount of news that can be issued —especially when multiplied by the massive circulation figures of *The Times*. In a 25-page memorandum, Morison concluded that the house typeface needed to be updated. What became Times New Roman, however, was neither redrawn from scratch nor merely an amendment of the existing version, but rather *amalgamated* from a number of different typefaces made at various points over the previous 400 years. The mongrel result was effectively collaged from past forms, so the lowercase e doesn't exactly "match" the lowercase a—at least not according to the usual standards of typographic consistency. Up close, Times New Roman is full of such quirks.


THE TIMES

LATE LONDON EDITION

LONDON MONDAY OCTOBER 3 1932

PRICE

DEATHS (continued)

PERSONAL

PERSONAL

PERSONAL

BUSINESS OFFERS

CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

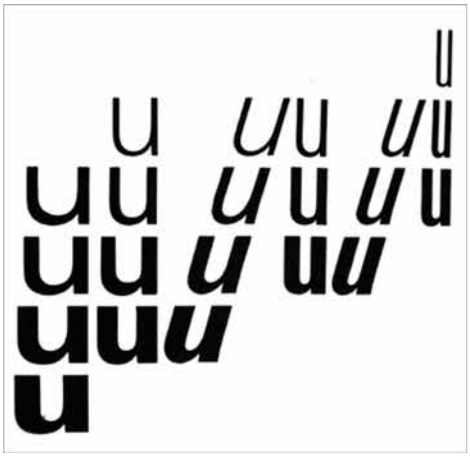
CHEPSTOW RACE CLUB.



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The design of letterforms usually manifests an individual designer's aesthetic impulse at a given point in time, but Times New Roman was the bastard offspring of MANY designers working ACROSS time, with Morison's role something like that of producer, editor, or arranger. The most frequently repeated account of the type's development suggests that Morison gave an existing type sample and some rough sketches to an assistant in the paper's advertising department, who duly cobbled together the new font. Whatever the story, in a note on HIS type, Morison concluded, auspiciously enough: "Ordinary readers, for whom a type is what it does, will be pleased to leave them to analyze the spirit of the letter."

French type designer Adrian Frutiger took the rational mapping of the Romain du Roi to another plateau with Univers, released by the foundry Deberny & Peignot in 1957. In line with the all-encompassing aspirations of mid-20th century Swiss design—locus of the so-called International Style—Univers was conceived as an unusually extended family of fonts. The standard palette of variants, traditionally limited to regular, italic, bold, and sometimes bold italic, was expanded sevenfold, yielding a total of 21 fonts to be cut at any given size. In the foundry's publicity, the family was usually housed in a two-dimensional matrix: an X-axis charts relative WIDTH interspersed with POSITION (Frutiger's term for slant), while the Y-axis charts relative WEIGHT. The family DNA is manifest in a few eccentricities, such as a square dot over the i and a double-barred lower-case a, while individual character sets are named according to their position in the matrix—55 for standard roman, 56 for standard oblique, 65 for medium roman, 66 for medium oblique, and so on.



Univers' matrix implies that the family could potentially procreate in any direction *ad infinitum*, and, in fact, the project has remained notably open since its inception. Frutiger himself reworked the typeface for digital release by Linotype in 1997, raising the total number of distinct character sets from the original 21 to 63. These included additions to both ends of the chart (Ultra Light and Extended Heavy), along with new monospace variants, requiring a third number to be added to the identifying code. In the wake of Univers' popularity, further dimensions have since been introduced, including extended character sets such as Central European, and non-Latin alphabets such as Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, and Japanese. This globalization culminated in 2011 with Linotype rechristening the entire design "Univers Next."

. . .

Towards the end of "The Concept of a Meta-font," an admirably frank Knuth wonders: "The idea of a meta-font should now be clear. But what good is it?"

Hofstadter, for one, had an idea: "Never has an author had anything remotely like this power to control the final appearance of his or her work." Indeed, seeing his own writing in print years earlier, Knuth had been so upset by the shoddy standards of early digital typesetting that he resolved to do it himself—not unlike Morison with his *Times* ad. It took longer than expected, but a decade later, Knuth had designed TeX, an automated typesetting system still in wide use today within academic publishing. MetaFont was initally developed as handmaiden to TeX, to generate the fonts to be used within the broader tasks of document markup and page assembly. However, as MetaFont developed as a project in its own right, its purpose was less immediately apparent. At the time of his *Visible Language* article at least, MetaFont appears to be more a case of hobbyist tinkering in search of an eventual application.

To be fair, Knuth does propose a few uses, all of which were already possible but certainly enhanced by the speed of computer processing. One is the ability to adjust the details of a particular font in line with the limits of a given output device—to make letters thinner or less intricate, for instance, so as to resist type "filling in" with either ink (on paper) or pixels

(on low-resolution monitors). A second is the possibility of generating countless iterations of the same basic design with slight differences in order to compare and contrast. But a more surprising (and most emphatically-stated) third function of MetaFont, according to its creator, is to meet the "real need" of "mankind's need for variety." In other words, to create difference for the sake of difference.

And so the notion of developing MetaFont as an autonomous project rather than as one of TeX's machine-parts appears to aim foremost at expanding the possibilities of literary expression—anticipating "greater freedom," a "typeface of one's own," "multiple fonts to articulate multiple voices," and so on. It's worth recalling, though, that when Knuth invented TeX in order to better typeset his own pages, or Morison refurbished *The Times*, their impetus was fundamentally reactive, not constructive. They weren't out to expand the possibilities for expression *per se*, only to reinstate standards that had been eroded—ones that had been established in the first place to articulate written language as clearly as possible, not to pile on the effects. As Knuth himself states, typefaces are more medium than message, to the extent that "A font should be sublime in its appearance but subliminal in its effect." What he didn't foresee (or at least worry over) is that mankind's real need for variety would tend towards the wholesale takeoever of novelty as an end in itself.

. . .

In his 1928 book *One-Way Street*, the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin had already anticipated Knuth's "power to control the final appearance of his or her work," alluding to the artistic ends that an increased intimacy between writer and technology might foster. Specifically, he predicted that the writer will start to compose his work with a typewriter instead of a pen when "the precision of typographic forms has entered directly into the conception of his books," to the degree that "new systems with more variable typefaces might then be needed."

By writing directly into a mechanical form rather than a manuscript (as we're doing right now) the writer would be working closer to the nature of the multiplied result, and through an increasing awareness and gradual mastery of the form's new limitations and possibilities *the writing itself

would evolve;* the shorter the distance between the raw material of words and their processed output, the more entwined the content and form from the outset. This line of thinking was more famously expounded by Benjamin in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which more broadly argues that an authentic, pertinent art is the result of engagement with the latest technological innovations.

Benjamin was an active Marxist, committed to the notion that the technologies of manufacture—the "means of production"—ought to be owned by the people who operate them. In 1934's "The Author as Producer," instead of focusing on factories and workers, he attempts to pinpoint the nature of a *socially committed art.* Writing and the other arts, he writes, are grounded in social structures such as educational institutions and publishing networks, but rather than merely asking how an artist's work stands in relation TO these structures, he queries how it stands IN them. He demands that artists refrain from merely adopting political "content," propagating an ideological cause, and work instead to transform the root-level MEANS by which their work is produced and distributed. This "progressive" artistic approach INEVITABLY manifests a "correct" political tendency. The work practices in lieu of preaching.

Benjamin's first case study in "The Author as Producer" is the Soviet writer Sergei Tretiakov, who lived and worked on an agricultural commune for extended periods before writing his experiences up into a novel. He is offered as an exemplary "operative writer," implicating himself in the matter at hand, as opposed to the common hack who merely observes and "gives information." Benjamin's Exhibit A, though, is his immediate contemporary Bertolt Brecht, who subverted orthodox drama by way of his epic theatre's celebrated "distancing effects"—leaving the lights on, renouncing expository narrative, presenting a series of objective "situations" in order that the spectators draw their own conclusions. Via these and other manipulations of "technique," Brecht transformed "the functional relation between the stage and the public, text and production, director and actor."

Necessarily leading by his own and others' example, then, Benjamin urges the artist to perpetually reconsider his role away from prevailing norms, job descriptions, professional standards, and outside expectations

generally. What MIGHT the work of a constructively-minded "writer" constitute? Are the abilities to distill an opinion and turn a phrase adequately deployed via the regular mediums—newspaper columns, books, journals and pamphlets—or might they be more usefully channeled through writing, say, captions to photographs, or scripts to make films; or indeed by renouncing writing altogether and taking up photography instead? Hence the essay's title is also its proposition: the writer (or artist) should be less a hemmed-in author than a free-ranging producer, closing the divide between her "intellectual" and "productive" activities.

. . .

In "A Note on the Type" (2010) we previously offered a history and extension of Knuth's MetaFont project. Our appreciative "note" (more a love-letter written 30 years late) was then typeset in our own updated version of MetaFont—basically Knuth's project rebooted for the PostScript generation and, following a throwaway remark by the late David Foster Wallace, rechristened Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font. That "single" note has since been published in multiple contexts and formats—on screens, pages, and walls. While all conform to the same basic essay template, each new instance adds three bits of writing by other people, each typeset in unique, freshly-generated MTDBT2-fonts to demonstrate the software's essential plasticity. These extra texts have alluded to various facets of the project—*repetition,* *habit,* or *the gray area between art and design,* for example—that have suggested themselves as it has rolled palimpsestuously along.

Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font picked up where Knuth's MetaFont left off. In fact, the only OSTENSIBLE difference between the two is that the new version was re-scripted in contemporary code to run on current computers. When typefaces are reduced to on/off bits of information, the typographic norms established by metal type (and carried over into photocomposition) are no longer bound to material necessity —they can be ignored and modified, and this is precisely what Knuth did. However, it was only with the advent and proliferation of PostScript in the early 1980s that typefaces became "device independent," freed from their association with particular composing machines and their controlling companies. But beyond this nominal "language difference," MTDBT2F

remained more or less faithful to MetaFont's founding principles—not least its wacko parameters borrowed from Knuth's Computer Modern font, which include "SUPERNESS," "CURLINESS," and so on.

The ACTUAL difference between the two, on the other hand, is less easy to discern. One clue is the simple difference in time: what it meant to make it *then;* and what it means to make it *now.*

In his essay "On the New" (2002), Russian art theorist Boris Groys wrote:

**Being new is, in fact, often understood as a combination of being different and being recently-produced. We call a car a NEW car if this car is different from other cars, and at the same time the latest, most recent model produced ... But as Kierkegaard pointed out, to be new is by no means the same as being different ... the new is a DIFFERENCE WITHOUT DIFFERENCE, or a difference which we are unable to recognize because it is not related to any pre-given structural code.**

He continues:

**For Kierkegaard, therefore, the only medium for a possible emergence of the new is the ordinary, the "non-different," the identical—not the OTHER, but the SAME.**

MTDBT2F is, more-or-less, the same as MetaFont, abiding the obvious fact that it swallows its predecessor. Although the result may look the same, it clearly can't be, because in addition to the "productive" software, the new version embeds its "intellectual" backstory—a story which is not merely supplementary but absolutely essential. MTDBT2F is a tool to generate countless PostScript fonts, sure, but it is *at least equally* a tool to think around and about MetaFont.

This broader notion is already ingrained in that original *Visible Language* debate, again most keenly foreseen by Hofstadter, who wrote that one of the best things MetaFont might do is inspire readers to chase after the intelligence of an alphabet, and "yield new insights into the elusive 'spirits' that flit about so tantalizingly, hidden just behind those lovely shapes we call 'letters.'" Hofstadter is still referencing fonts and computers here, but

his sentiments can easily be read under what art critic Dieter Roelstraete recently called "the taunting of thought." In fact, Walter Benjamin closed "The Author as Producer" with the following summary:

**You may have noticed that the chain of thought whose conclusion we are approaching only presents the writer with a single demand, the demand of REFLECTING, of thinking about his position in the process of production.**

At least as much as MTDBT2F serves as a functioning typeface, or set of typefaces, then, it is also a red herring, a carrot, and a mirror. It is a nominal setup for a nominal subject to play out, typically moving in and out of focus, veering off into other fields, and trespassing on other topics. In this unruly manner, the font serves us (or anyone else) exactly as it serves language—as rubber cement, a bonding agent.

. . .

In "The Designer as Producer," a quick riff on "The Author as Producer" from 2004, design critic Ellen Lupton writes that Benjamin "celebrated the proletarian ring of the word 'production,' and the word carries those connotations into the current period," offering us "a new crack at materialism, a chance to reengage the physical aspects of our work." To claim, or reclaim, the "tools of production" in the arts today, though, shouldn't imply some form of engagement, or worse, REengagement, with heavy machinery, hand tools, hard materials, or the studio (art-equivalent of the factory floor). More plausibly, it implies digital code.

Code resides in The Hollows, the curiously-named engine room of immaterial media, domain of scripts and programs, that has been likened by design group Metahaven to the stock market crash: "surface without surface, the exposure of the naked infrastructure or root level system language which precedes surface itself, surface without its effects."

Another recent essay titled after Benjamin and written by Boris Groys, "Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction," invokes the protagonists of *The Matrix* as being uniquely equipped to perceive the workings of The Hollows. While Neo and co. were able to read image files as code, the average spectator "does not have the magic pill … that would allow him

or her to enter the invisible digital space otherwise concealed behind the digital image." And auspiciously enough, Groys also draws on our by-now-familiar terms, letter and spirit.

In updating Benjamin's title, Groys signals the same basic investigation —of an existing phenomenon (this time religion rather than art) in a new milieu (digital rather than mechanical). Religious practice, he writes, has always involved the reproduction of institutionalized forms, but as Western religion has become increasingly personal and privatized, an unconditional "freedom of faith" has devloped alongside traditional, conditional forms. Contemporary fundamentalist religion remains, by definition, grounded in the devout repetition of a fixed "letter" rather than a free "spirit" —material and external rather than essential and implied. This antinomy of "dead letter vs. living spirit" (which tallies easily enough with the legal one related by Hofstadter) informs all Western discourse on religion. On one hand, the typically "spirited" anti-fundamentalist account favors a living, powerful tradition capable of adapting its central message to different times and places, thus maintaining its vitality and relevance. Conversely, the ritualized repetition of the fundamentalist "letter" amounts to a kind of revolutionary stasis or violent rupture in the ever-changing order of things. Religious fundamentalism can thus be conceived as religion *after the death of the spirit:* letter and spirit are separated and polarized to the extent that the former no longer guarantees the latter. "A material difference is now JUST a difference," Groys writes, "—there is no essence, no being, and no meaning underlying such a formal difference at a deeper level."

While earlier media suited and so precipitated the circulation of conditional religion (1:1 mechanically-reproduced texts and images disseminated via orthodox channels), contemporary web-based media more closely approximate and so facilitate the unconditional—the wild dissemination of idiosyncratic views. And as digital reproduction supplants mechanical reproduction, the video image becomes the medium of choice. The cheap, anonymous, promiscuous character of digital information guarantees reproduction and dissemination more than any other historical medium. But what's REALLY being duplicated is, of course, the image's code —its invisible DNA.

In the 1930s, Benjamin had reasonably assumed that future technologies would only continue to guarantee the resemblance between an original and its copy, but now the opposite is true: each manifestation of the original is actually *different;* because typically overridden and recalibrated according to each spectator's local preferences (resolution, color calibration, style sheets, etc.) while ONLY THE CODE REMAINS THE SAME. In Groys' final analysis, spirit and letter are transposed from a metaphysical to a technological plane, where "spirit" is script, and each new visualization of that script is a corresponding "letter." (Picture m4v's, jpeg's and mp3's as angels "transmitting their divine command.")
By now the terms are confused to the point of inversion: the so-called "spirit" of digital code is fixed, while the so-called "letter" of its various manifestations is fluid. Consequently, forms—surfaces—are no longer tethered to definite meaning, no longer plausible, and so no longer to be trusted.

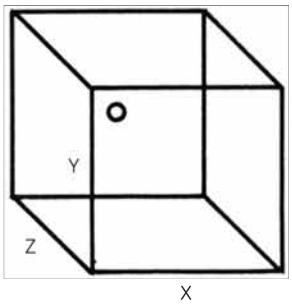
This is old news. However, as digital media become increasingly ubiquitous, templates increasingly homogenous and entrenched, the most likely place a "writer" might usefully "produce" today is in The Hollows. Hidden or invisible, and otherwise inaccessible to most, this is where we might conceivably reconnect spirit and letter, essence and identity —for "Ordinary readers, for whom a type is what it does."

. . .

How to keep things moving?

MetaFont and MTDBT2F were both set up to generate an infinite number of individual typefaces by tweaking a few simple parameters at different points in time. But what if we make one of those parameters *time itself*?

First let's transpose the extant ones onto a 3-D graph, running WEIGHT (a kind of bold) along the X-axis, SLANT (more or less italic) up the Y, and extending SUPERNESS (a kind of chutzpah) off into the Z beyond. We'll ignore CURLINESS for the time being, but we do have to account for a fourth factor, PEN, best conceived as a digital "nib" that determines the line's fundamental shape and angle at any given point.




Now let's send that point *constantly moving* through this imaginary cube. As it wanders randomly and aimlessly through the space, it trails a script that renders an alphabet whose form morphs according to its position relative to the other parameters—not forgetting the fact that the point-nib-pen itself is in perpetual flux. And, crucially, it never stops. The outcome might be usefully apprehended as the potentially endless matrix of Frutiger's Univers, amalgamated over time like Morison's Times New Roman, articulating itself in the manner of Bayer's Geometric Alphabet, over the precise wireframe of Louis XIV's Romain du Roi. Which amounts to a typographic oxymoron: a SINGLE typeface that's simultaneously MANY typefaces and never stops moving.

Naming this shapeshifter is easy enough—just shunt another couple of boxcars onto the end of the night train to arrive at (deep breath) Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font-4-D, or MTDBT2F4D for short.

. . .

Writing in one place inevitably *performs* in another.

Here, for example, reflecting on Hofstadter's and Morison's and Groys' various assimilations of the terms "letter" and "spirit" fosters a more robust, compound sense of their allegorical purpose. It produces a cosmopolitan thought. When grappling with ideas in one domain is brought to bear on another, those ideas are more firmly grasped and so more readily utilized somewhere else … towards considering (say) the ways in which relative chauvinism and relative open-mindedness manifest themselves in daily life and work.

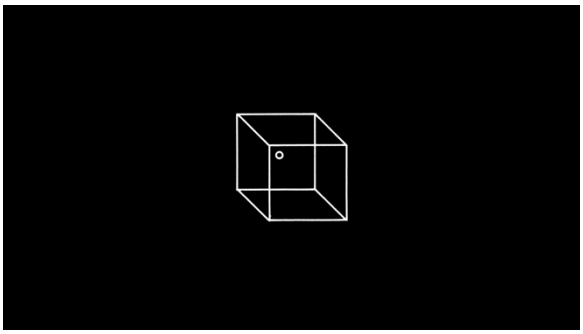
Or, equally, writing the first small script when learning a new programming language, the sole purpose of which is to generate two words that mark the border between instruction & instance. Swaddled in asterisks and set without a full point, this text always reads:

**Hello world**

There's something not quite consistent about this initial version of 'Letter & Spirit', in that it doesn't embody its subject and so doesn't perform its point to the same degree as its predecessor. The many versions of 'A Note on the Time' were typeset in multiple instances of its subject – an essentially multiple font. To achieve the same performative tautology, 'Letter & Spirit' would need to be 'set' in the moving '4D' version of its subject, rather than one of the theoretically infinite yet momentarily fixed '2D' ones. But after having worked on the MoMA *Trailer*, the elements were in place. All we had to do was cross-pollinate the essay with the animation.

As usual, the transposition from one medium to another required a huge amount of re-editing. The plausible amount of attention we're able to devote to reading text on a screen (both in public and private) is famously way less than that afforded to printed pages. Based on the template of the *Trailer*, we worked out that a similarly animated version of the unabridged essay would end up a few hours long, so it was clearly going to require some serious compression.



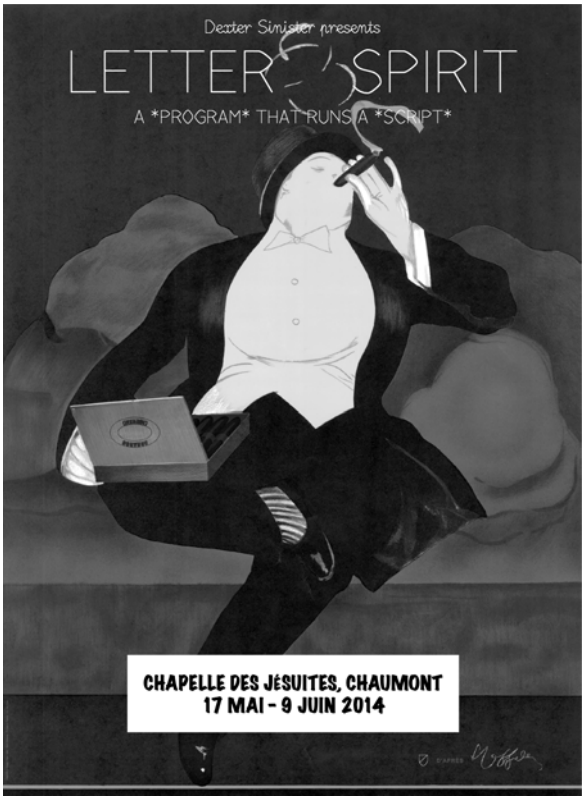
In spring 2012, we had cause to make a trial version of the animated version of 'Letter & Spirit' to be used as a sample text on an eccentric mechanical subtitling device, which was on temporary display in a church during an annual graphic design festival in Chaumont, France.[20] We squeezed out a first draft of the reduced essay, and from there honed it into increasingly shorter, denser versions for a couple of other venues later the same year. First on a large cinema screen part of a film programme at Tramway, Glasgow,[21] then as part of a day-long series of events that launched a long-term 'research program' on 'black-and-white psychedelia' that we assembled together with Lars Bang Larsen and Angie Keefer under the compund name *Dexter Bang Sinister*.[22] Then we showed a 'finished' version, clocking in at just over 16 minutes, back at the same church at the same French design festival exactly two years after

[20] 23rd International Poster and Graphic Design Festival, Chaumont, France 26 May – 10 June, 2012. The machine was part of Jürg Lehni's project, 'Moving Picture Show'.

[21] *Tramway Festival of Artists' Moving Image*, Friday 14 September, 2012. *Letter & Spirit* was shown together with John Smith's *Slow Glass* (1991), which also served to inaugurate our three-screen projection *'Identity'* at the same venue (see §8.5–7 below). Around the same time, the animation was also running on a TV set over on the other side of the city as part of a group show at the Centre for Contemporary Arts (formerly the 3rd Eye Centre).

[22] *Research Programme: Dexter Bang Sinister*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, Denmark, 21 January – 28 October, 2012. Its themes were developed in *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #4, 2012.

the initial demo.[23] As the festival is based on the town's collection of seminal posters, we 'borrowed' a hundred-year old cigar advertisement that hung in a local hotel and repurposed it as an announcement for our piece, the essence of which we finally managed to distill into an accurate subtitle: *a *program* that runs a *script**.




Concluding this section is a quick two-part speech we read out at Tramway in Glasgow to introduce one of the early screenings of *Letter & Spirit* along with with British structuralist filmmaker John Smith's *Slow Glass* (1988–91, 16mm), a 40-minute meditation on time, change and memory considered relative to the industrial production of glass. Moreover, we juxtaposed the two in order to allude to and inaugurate our three-screen projection *'Identity'*,[24] which was about to open elsewhere in the building later the same evening.

Before the films we read this:

So tonight we're going to show John Smith's *Slow Glass* from the late 1980s, and our own *Letter & Spirit* made earlier this year, both chosen in view of our exhibition on 'Identity' which we can go round the corner and see afterwards. The first thing to say about these two films, perhaps, is that the second one isn't properly a film at all. It's a video. And then it's not even really a video, but rather, as it states itself, a running computer script – a bunch of code being rendered in realtime.

The first is by John Smith, a British structuralist who as you might know has been making short films since the 1970s. At 40 minutes, this is one of the longest he's made to date. His most well-known is probably *The Girl Chewing Gum*, a 12-minute gem from 1976 that consists of a more or less fixed 10-minute-long shot of a drab junction in Dalston, London, while he retroactively narrates what's about to happen about a second in advance of it actually happen on screen. He then appears to direct the various passers-by, animals, vehicles, and even a clock on the top of a building across the street. You might recall him instructing the clock's minute hand to make one complete revolution every 60

[23] 25th International Poster and Graphic Design Festival, Chaumont, France, 17 May – 9 June, 2014.

[24] See §8.5–7 below.

seconds. The scene is banal, sound and image are sent out of sync, and it's improbably funny, like most of his films.

*Slow Glass* is apparently autobiographical but still primarily concerned with time, particularly the plastic nature of change and memory. In it, a number of disparate vignettes are linked by a running thread about the manufacture of glass that reminds us of the ever-alarming fact that glass is actually a liquid.

This is the point of overlap with *Letter & Spirit*, which runs for 17-and-a-half minutes. It's a super-compressed version of an essay of the same name that we wrote for the last issue of the journal we publish, *Bulletins of The Serving Library*. Both the article and its animation tell the considerably complex backstory of a fundamentally plastic typeface we've been developing over the past few years.

As such, both *Slow Glass* and *Letter & Spirit* are industrial films – by which we mean they conform in more or less twisted ways to that largely lapsed genre of documentary that would typically track the journey of Coca Cola bottles or cars or computers along their respective assembly lines. So Smith's film is about the material production of glass, and ours about the immaterial production of a font. But there's something else going on too: both are equally – or maybe predominantly – about the production of metaphors: the production of glass comparative to the plasticity of time, for instance.

In this sense, they're perhaps more rightly thought of as *meta*-Industrial films – though that sounds pretty unappealing. As it happens, when Plato first used the term 'metaphysics', he didn't mean to connote anything like 'beyond' or 'transcendent', but just 'after'. His book on metaphysics simply came after his book on physics. Abiding this sense, then, we can perhaps more usefully conceive of these two pieces, *Slow Glass* and *Letter & Spirit*, as *post*-industrial films. That's how we'd like to think of them tonight anyway.

And after the films we read this:

So now we're going to take a break from the film program and invite you to the gallery to inaugurate a three-screen projection called *'Identity'* – that's in quotation marks as well as italics. In order to link from here to there, we want to quickly point to the two conjunctions in our apparently unremarkable compound title of the double bill you just saw; namely, '*Slow Glass* and *Letter & Spirit*'

Although the two ands in the title sound the same, the first one is a regular A-N-D that separates (or joins) the two films, while the second one is an amspersand (&), the single looping character originally derived from the conjoined, calligraphic French for 'and' (*et*, an E and a T) that separates – or joins – the 'Letter' with the 'Spirit' of our piece. The distinction describes a subtle class system, a hierarchy. We were both schooled in typography, which is to say the art, or maybe craft, of the articulation of visible language; and we were taught that an ampersand asserts a closer bond between two words than a regular AND – a more intimate link

like salt & pepper,
or knife & fork,
or fish & chips,
or left & right,
or Bonnie & Clyde

– all are twin terms that constitute their own unit.

The films we're just seen are both concerned with making apparent things that are usually imperceptible, like the invisible crawl of time – which hopefully chimes with this subtle difference between & and AND.

Also worth pointing out is the fact that, unusually for the Roman alphabet, an ampersand actually looks like what it does. That's to say, it's a *fundamentally entwined* character, a line that threads through and connects with itself, contrary to a plain old AND which, in a more typically arbitrary fashion, doesn't look like what it does.

And this proximity, or lack of proximity, between what something is and how it comes across – the form in which it's dressed – happens to be the main theme of the *'Identity'* projection elsewhere in the building tonight.

## 8.4: ARTISTIC LICENSE

A couple more practical applications for both 2D and 4D versions of the font cropped up. The first was quick and straightforward. We were invited to design a cover for one of 12 centenary issues of *Art in America*, specifically the magazine's annual gallery listings edition. As the cover had to prominently list the basic categories being inventorized, we simply proposed using different MTDBT2F for each word – but then suggested they extend this logic to the entire listings inside. Surprisingly, they agreed, and the whole issue ran exclusively as if contaminated by the font for one issue. We duly ran the latest verison of 'Note on the Type' in smallprint on the last page.

And finally, we were able to put MTDBT2F4D to work as a particularly fluid graphic identity for the Paris and San Francisco-based Kadist Art Foundation, essentially a private collection of art with public ambitions. One of the Foundation's curators seen the signage and attendant wall essay at Artissima in Turin back in 2010, and now, a couple of years on, asked whether they could adopt one or more of the fonts generated by our software as part of their new identity, which involved the usual overhaul of their website, printed matter and other PR. We proposed to not simply supply a single instance or set of the 2D original, but to license the 4D extension for a circumscribed period of time. Given that the font would primarily be used as a logotype on their website (www.kadist.org), the script could constantly run live and hence the letters change constantly. However, we set the tempo in order that the font would morph very, *very* slowly; so slow, in fact, that's its beyond (current) human perception.

We settled on 10 years as a reasonably unreasonable amount of time to license the font – the idea being not only to *allow* Kadist to use the software for that long, but equally *bind* them to doing so. Under the influence of the *'Identity'* project we were working on around the same time,[25] we were interested to work against the frequent turnaround of institutional identities, which are often readily scrapped either by a new management seeking to assert itself, or simply in view of keeping up with the latest fashions. We also convinced the Foundation to acquire this specifically tailored MTDBT2F4D for their collection, thus complicating the identity's *own* identity – another case of ambiguously applied art.

And so we ended up handing over a piece of software set to randomly alter their logotype over a period of 10 years. The 'KADIST' embedded in the website would be constantly active; and as and when the name was required to be manifest elsewhere – on a piece of print, for instance – the particular state of the logo *at that particular point in time* would be output for single use. As such, the logo would visibly change across the legacy of relatively 'fixed' media, too.




The whole package was presented to a public audience at Kadist's San Francisco wing on the evening of 19 January, 2013. We introduced the project, played that last version of *Letter & Spirit*, fielded some questions, then read the binding part of the contract out loud and had the Kadist management undersign it along with ourselves in front of a large crowd of witnesses. And in what then amounted to some kind of warped full-circle, this 'contract' was written into a version of one of our 'Note on the Time' pieces – which by this point had branched off into its own haphazard family tree. To *really* sign off from this project, we finally published versions of the three essays that make up the present chapter in the guise of a 'style guide' to Kadist's new acquisition, available to download from their site:

[25] See §8.5–7 below.

The time right now is 2011 Feb 18 3:34 PM. Now, have a look at the time stamped at the bottom of this page that marks when this file was last edited. It reports 2013 Jan 22 3:45 PM. What's going on? These two times could never be precisely alike—each is a specific POINT, and no two are ever exactly the same.

Both originate from the same source though—a networked time server maintained by Apple Computer and named, simply, time.apple.com. This external beacon commands not only the official time here on my MacBook, but also synchronizes its local clock with those of Apple users worldwide (laptops, desktops, phones, pods, pads, who-knows-whats-nexts). It's easy enough to think of time.apple.com as a master clock, but actually it is itself only a network of time machines, a collection of counters comprised of a circuit of servers—computers named time1.apple.com, time2.apple.com, time3, time4, time5, time6 and time7. (The server my laptop is using right now (time4) is located at 20400 Stevens Creek Blvd. in Cupertino, California, just a few blocks away from Apple's appropriate corporate address, 1 Infinite Loop.)

All of these servers communicate and agree what time it is at time.apple.com. But this covers only North and South America, and also must synchronize itself with time.asia.apple.com and time.europe.apple.com to provide a unified answer. All this close coordination, communicated over distance and time, is governed by Network Time Protocol (NTP), a set of time-sharing conventions developed in advance of the World Wide Web in 1985, by University of Delaware professor Dr. David Mills. It is one of the oldest, and essential, Internet protocols.

NTP runs as a Ponzi-scheme. Each layer in the scheme organizes a set of time servers, who both receive the correct time from the layer above (each layer is properly called a "stratum" in the protocol) and also are responsible for dispersing the correct time to computers in the next layer down. At each level, more and more computers are connected.

The protocol works by sending a message between two points on a network containing two bits of information: 1. what time it is now at the source, and 2. how long it took to transmit this message to its receiver. Simple addition tells you what time it is on the receiving computer

(according to the sender). So, what time is it, precisely? Multiply this transaction through the layer-cake of millions of computers redundantly organized around the Network Time Protocol, and you'll begin to see a collective consensus emerge that passes for accuracy.

Turns out that in order to send a MESSAGE between two POINTS, it's essential that the two points AGREE on what time it is, otherwise the communication is jumbled. A quick thought gymnastic confirms. You live in Los Angeles and I live in New York. Settling on Eastern Standard Time, your clock tells you it is 2:34 PM, and mine tells me it is 2:32 PM, and you tell me, "Hey! In one minute the eclipse is going to start, you'd better run outside right now to see it (don't forget your sunglasses)!" and I drop what I'm doing to rush right outside. I see nothing. I'm bummed. I write back — "Nothing doing out there, I must've missed it." You reply, "But the eclipse is scheduled for 2:33 pm! You probably came in too early!" And I respond, "I'd already missed it then. It's 2:34 now." "No you haven't, it's in one minute still!" In the midst of this tedious exchange, surely the moon has passed in front of the sun and everyone in question has missed the party. What a misunderstanding!

These kinds of missteps multiply exponentially over a network, and it should be blindingly clear how critical agreement on the correct time is now, in our intimately-connected present. For communication, then, perhaps time is more of a medium than a measure. If we are going to be able to say anything to each other, we'd better start by agreeing on what time it is.

Some two years ago we were approached by Kadist Art Foundation, who asked if they could use our Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font for their graphic identity. We thought, instead, that it would be more useful to extend MTDBT2F by making a version that is constantly changing, gradually evolving over 10 years. Everyone agreed, and we drafted a letter on 21 October 2011:

**This is a letter of agreement between DEXTER SINISTER and KADIST ART FOUNDATION. Dexter Sinister will provide graphic design consulting, production and programming services. We will design and program a custom software program that generates a very slowly**

**changing typeface to serve as the logotype for Kadist. This font software will be hosted online at www.kadist.org and produce a time-specific font anytime it is accessed. Rather than one specifically identifiable font to mark the identity of Kadist, this fluid typeface will render distinctly at any moment in time. This custom typeface may be used by Kadist in print applications, on the internet and in other unspecified uses that arise over the coming 10 years.**

**The scope of work and associated fees as agreed are 5000 USD. Delivery date will be November 15, 2011. Any additional work will contracted and billed separately.**

**We will begin this project with payment of the attached invoice for 50% of the total fees and the return of this letter of agreement.**

We all signed the document and work began. But let's back out for a minute and look again at the time reported in the first sentence of this text. This time was handed down through the cascade of networked time servers described previously, but where did the original "time" come from and how was it set?

In the top tier of the Network Time Protocol, one computer is hooked directly to one extra-ordinarily accurate clock. Currently, this is the Cesium Fountain Atomic Clock running at the National Institutes of Standards and Technology laboratory in Boulder, Colorado, named NIST-F1. Atomic clocks rely on the fuzzed logics of quantum mechanics. As electrons orbit the nucleus of an atom, rather than winding down gradually in energy like a pendulum, they lose energy in discrete chunks, at which point the circling electron jumps down to the next closest orbit producing something like a very very very faint "click." These steps are consistent for any one atom, and this quantity is its resonant frequency. The resonant frequency of the cesium atom, for example, is 9,192,631,770 Hertz (or cycles per second). And in a twist of recursive identity, the NIST has set the official standard for 1 second to be equal to 9,192,631,770 vibrations of the cesium atom. The United States' primary time and frequency standard is set then by NIST-F1 and is accurate to within one second every 60 million years.

So you can now more or less assume that the time stamped in the first line of this text does rather accurately reflect when the first sentence was written.

We'd all agree that 2011 Feb 18 3:34 PM identifies one specific POINT in time, a forever unrepeatable instant that disappears as quickly as we can stamp it. 18th-century empirical philosopher David Hume would certainly concur. Working from the center of the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume described his particular, uncompromised version of empiricism. He asserted that everything we know or can know about the world arrives to us only through direct sensory experience. Nothing exists outside of our own practical encounter with it as we move through the world. Further, he suggests that any sensible experience is composed of a single indivisible sensory building block which is marked by the limits of our perception. If you can't experience it, it does not exist. Hume most certainly was an essentialist.

While American empirical philosopher William James built many of his ideas on Hume's scaffolds, he also rejected Hume's reductive essentialism. In James's second-wave or "Radical" Empiricism, although knowledge about the world still arrived through direct experience, he dismissed what he called Hume's "atomism" or the idea that this experience was ever-assembled from smaller elementary blocks. James was, instead, a "Gestaltist"—a totalist who, although insisting on the incrementalism of building the world piece by piece, also understood that any one experience was whole and complete in and of itself, neither equivalent to nor reducible into any constituent bits.

So if we could query Hume on our time marked in the first line of this text, he would identify it as one irreducible moment. However, ask William James and he says that this POINT is really more of a DURATION. Time is like that—both point and duration. This is how it can bend and warp. A week, a second, a season: all are specific and discrete, but none are the same. The present can be cut to any number of lengths, from a single vibration of a cesium atom to the 3-month run of a contemporary art exhibition.

On Fri, 4 May 2012, about six months late, and after many technical

hurdles, the slowly evolving typeface was ready. We sent an email to Kadist describing the software apparatus involved which (anticipating the difficulty of keeping all this straight later) was written as much for ourselves as for the record generally. The subject line was "10 years from now":

**How to keep things moving?**

**Meta-the-difference-between-the-2-Font-4-D (MTDBT2F4D) is alive and has been running at a considerably sped-up pace for the last week on temp.kadist.org, depositing new fonts once a minute continuously. It is now ready to go live and begin making new fonts once a week for the next 10 years.**

**This is how the whole thing runs: the software is composed of many parts made under different circumstances by different people at different times built one on top of each other, like a lasagna of sorts. At the bottom of the heap (the starting point) is MetaFont, a software written by Donald Knuth in 1979. MetaFont produces *bitmap* fonts on-the-fly, specific to the output device, using a framework of essential skeletons for each letter that are drawn as required with a particular pen. The skeleton of a K, for example, will look quite different on each occasion depending on the explicit parameters fed to the software when it's run.**

**So Knuth's MetaFont (MF) already existed. We updated the framework that sits on the top of it, which both allows MF to run on a contemporary OS, and also massages the parameterization process, adding and altering some of the adjustable values. These additional or adjusted parameters include SLANT, SUPERNESS, WEIGHT, and PEN (which includes sub-settings for the form, rotation, and ratio between the width and height of the nib). These settings are expressed as a new set of MF source files.**

**The next layer is made of a tracing software (mftrace) and a font production program (fontforge), both automated through a bash script. This combination produces a newly convenient, installable TrueType-format font from the the 30-year-old MF sources. A subsequent set of files are used with four MORE programs (shell scripts that mix python and bash which call fontforge routines) also written by us.**

These are MTDBT2F-compile (assembles one proper MTDBT2-Font), MTDBT2F-convert (automates the batch creation of alternate versions), MTDBT2F-make (writes MF source files on the fly according to specific values fed in), and MTDBT2F-4D (a daemon-like process that moves the parametric values within an imaginary cube).

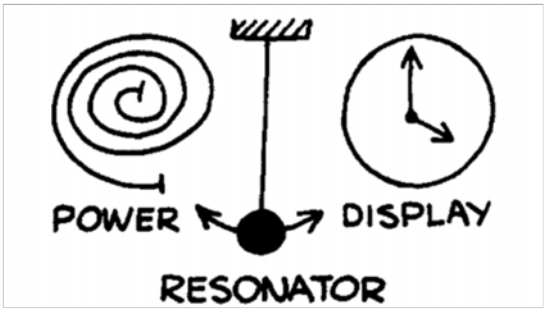
We imagine the resulting Meta-the-difference-between-the-two-Font-4-D as existing within the possibility space of this cube. Any one (momentary) instance of MTDBT2F4D exists as a point in the 3-dimensional space, defined by WEIGHT as the x-axis, SUPERNESS as the y-axis, and SLANT as the z-axis. We then take PEN—actually the most variable and perhaps consequential parameter in how the font looks—and set it traversing the 4th dimension of time. (PEN's values are also always incrementally changing within their own limits.) The minimum and maximum values for any of these are set before the process starts running, and, given that each step is made according to a random value generated by the software, and that the *changing* step values multiply through four dimensions, then the resulting forms (MTDBT2F4D fonts) can't be predicted.

On the kadist.org server, then, the entire shebang is controlled as a cron job (a timed event on the server computer) that triggers one final shell script (MTDBT2F-release). This performs the heavy lifting (installing final files in the proper places, cleaning up etc.). As you can see, it's a fussy, messy recipe, though considerable care was lavished over its assembly. At this point, we only need to flip a switch (i.e, change the cron job) to get the thing running at the 10-year pace—so you just need to let us know when that time comes. Given the protractedness and patience that has necessarily accompanied this baroque process so far, we'd prefer sooner than later.

The whiplash of this email back and forth between technical details and somewhat grander notions is pretty much the experience of the whole project—so we must say again thanks to all involved for the time, space and spirit necessary to make it happen. It's certainly a heap of work to produce something that "simply" updates and swallows a software from 40 years ago. Now we get to spend the next 10 watching it grow. Maybe in the meantime we'll evolve slower eyeballs.

MTDBT2F4D went live (well, in a trial run that lasted another six months, during which time we troubleshot any issues as the new Kadist website was being built) and things moved on. But let's double-back one more time to the time stamped in the first sentence: 2011 Feb 18 3:34 PM. And also, to the time as it stands right *now*: 2013 Jan 22 3:45 PM. We'll agree that the difference between these two points describes a length, but how can we measure it? Our meter-stick won't do. Time is nothing until it is counted, and for that we need a clock.

In *From Sundials to Atomic Clocks (Understanding Time and Frequency)*, James Jepsersen and Jane Fitz-Randolph describe keeping time as only a matter of counting the ticks of any regular, cyclical action. They also describe the constituent parts of a "clock" (or more properly a "clock system"). Schematically, it looks like this:




First, you need a device that can produce a periodic phenomenon (for example, a pendulum). This is the RESONATOR. Next you'll have to sustain the periodic motion by feeding it POWER (for example, the wound coil of a mechanical clock spring). Finally you need a means for counting, accumulating and rendering the ticks of the resonator. This is the DISPLAY (for example, a clock face and arms). Together, these three pieces define a clock. But of course to be useful — to measure a length — our clock must be RUNNING. With all of these conditions met, we can now simply determine the duration between writing the first sentence of this text and editing this one: 537 days, 0 hours, 59 minutes. And this delivers one final paradox: Time can only be measured by MOVING.
This "clock system" Jespersen and Randolph describe can be easily applied to the KADIST logo. In this case, POWER comes from the hodge-podge collection of softwares wrapped up into the Meta-the-difference-

between-the-two engine. This runs on the www.kadist.org server, automatically producing new versions of the font once a week, regular as, umm, clockwork. This timed release is the regular tick-tick-tick of the RESONATOR. Finally, the DISPLAY is the actual KADIST logo, and its specific typographic form, at any one point in time of course.

Now, in order to guarantee that this 10-year speculation is allowed to run its course, we need to seal the deal by signing a contract to license the software. It is based on MIT's concise template, with certain pragmatic and poetic alterations to suit this case.

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**The Software relies on platforms and protocols that will inevitably change over the next 10 years, as the speed of technology continues to accelerate to near-terminal velocity. Nevertheless, every reasonable effort will be made in good faith by DEXTER SINISTER and KADIST ART FOUNDATION to maintain the Software over this time period.**

Further, on signing and initiating this 10-year license, KADIST ART FOUNDATION asserts an up-front commitment to allowing this eventual process to run its course, without excessive concern as to the form of the logo at any one particular moment, and with willful disregard to the winds of fashion or the mandates of technology, but instead, to pledge and bond itself to the principle that slowness and attention are their own rewards.

19 January 2013

DEXTER SINISTER

KADIST ART FOUNDATION

## 8.5: HOW THINGS COME ACROSS

The remainder of this chapter tracks a project that takes a broader view of art institutional identities – and by proxy the rise of marketing culture in general. It began as a loose commission and ended up as a 'three-screen projection' for Artists Space, a privately sponsored, non-commercial gallery in New York's Soho. Established in 1972, the space was initially artist-run, and each consecutive exhibiting artist was responsible for choosing the next. It was unusually community-based and socially-minded, setting up benevolent initiatives like the Emergency Materials Fund and Independent Exhibitions Program, as well as the world's first artist registry, the Irving Sandler Artists File.

In 2008, German curator Stefan Kalmár was newly appointed as director. He immediately stripped out all the walls that had amassed in recent years to uncover a light, spacious shell, and around the same time approached us with the vague suggestion to work on 'something about the graphic identities of art institutions'. Artists Space's archive included a considerable amount of audio-visual four decades' worth of exhibitions and events, along with all the attendant printed matter – stationery, letters, press releases, invitations, posters and other publicity.

Early on, Stefan proposed we might draw on this collection of ephemera to tell the story of the space's graphic identity as it evolved over time. The material ranged from early eclectic iterations of 'non-identity' (i.e. made according to the whim of whoever happened to designing such material for any given event; often the exhibiting artist), through increasing consistency in the late 1970s (though still decidedly ad hoc), then a sequence of more conspicuously *stylish* treatments during the 1980s (marked by the colder look courtesy of newly affordable personal computers), and on to something distinctly more rigid, 'corporate' and 'branded' during and since the 1990s. In short, the collection was a textbook teleology of graphic fashions over the past 40 years, and Stefan saw how this simultaneously traced the ways such institutions perceived themselves – and so contrived to present themselves – in the context of a burgeoning global culture industry.

We suspected the real reason behind all this implied research was that Stefan actually meant to develop another new identity for Artists Space – only in some adroitly 'off' manner, perhaps somehow analogous to the space's newly skeletal interior. We could vaguely conceive how this might extend from, say, similarly reconsidering institution's history to yield some form of self-swallowing meta-identity– something conceptually over and above a mere redesign, at least. It didn't sound great. We said we'd think about it.

Although the idea of a meta-identity did hold some attraction, not least because we couldn't think of any immediate precedent, or what it might even mean,[26] we were reluctant to get involved because designing identities for institutions – art-based or otherwise – was the sort of work we'd spent a long time trying to avoid. One main refrain in this thesis is that concerns over 'identity' have come to dominate the field of design; that way too much time, energy, and money is spent worrying over how things come across as opposed to what things fundamentally are. The reasons why 'face values' are the driving force of contemporary commerce are patent enough, as are the ways in which such values are socially corrosive. Like many others, we were trying to conceive how to work outside and/or against and/or in spite of this condition where image presides over actuality. At the very least, we preferred to turn our attention to other ends if and when possible.

As it turned out, we'd been wrong about that imagined real reason behind Stefan's invitation, because soon afterwards Artists Space was reborn with a new identity designed by Berlin-based Manuel Raeder. Although not exactly a 'step removed' in the way we were dimly trying to perceive, it was nonetheless curiously and attractively simple: a no-nonsense, almost equilateral triangle that might variously and interchangeably suggest a primitive letter A, an upward-pointing arrow, an elemental Bauhaus reference, and so on.

[26] All this happened before we made the animated identity for Kadist Art Foundation, which reasonably qualifies as one such attempt (see §8.4 above).

With this phantom obligation out of the way, we reconsidered but found ourselves still procrastinating. At this point in our intermittent discussions with Stefan and a new co-curator, Richard Birkett, the material could equally have congealed into a book, exhibition, series of talks, or any other orthodox format. The lack of a clear target was less a reason for being stuck, however, than the fact that the project's stakes just didn't seem high enough. If the idea was to tell the immediate story of the institution's graphic identity in order to offset some broader allusions about the rise of parallel and commensurate *cultural* tendencies (from, say, political spin to identity politics), the story just didn't seem urgent or interesting enough to warrant the work.

Otherwise put, the story of the rise of identity as a cultural concern seems so self-evident (and old hat) that it was hard to see how any 'interpretation' we might bring to it could be anything but trite. Since the end of the 19th century, commercial enterprises have needed to distinguish themselves from other commercial enterprises, and their products from others' products, first in order to assert proprietary rights, then foster reputation, then recognition, and eventually loyalty. All of which underwent a change in kind – intensified – when the brand itself became the product rather than merely a signifier of one. More to the point, the mechanisms of identity – branding, marketing, PR – continue to work on us even as we readily comprehend how and why they work.

## 8.6: DEBATABLE

Variously self-described as a 'think tank', 'research group' or 'speculative design studio', Dutch duo Metahaven have recently worked with similar subject matter, though on a far more ambitious scale: global rather than local, political rather than cultural, and centred on the precarious identities of contemporary nation states. It's the running subject of their *Uncorporate Identity* (2010), a book that combines their own 'speculative design' projects with essays that cut across contemporary sociology, cultural criticism, political theory, anthropology, and philosophy.[27]

In 2008, just before we started thinking about Artists Space, they also published a 48-page pamphlet called *White Night Before a Manifesto*. The document is a terse, bombastic account of contemporary 'design' as having come to be more or less synonymous with immaterial, digital 'surface'.[28] Graphic designers are remodelled as 'information architects', uniformly tasked with imbuing endlessly multiplying surfaces with spurious, unaccountable values within spurious, unaccountable economies. It's a troubling, vertiginous narrative that, although certainly a reflection of its subject, is also partly the result of Metahaven's equivocal use of the word 'design'.

But the really discomfiting aspect of Metahaven's dystopian description is how airtight it is, i.e. the fact that it doesn't admit other possibilities. This is all the more curious given that their own work clearly demonstrates one such alternative – not least in the case of the pamphlet itself, which, although *about* surface, certainly examines it in considerable *depth*. By writing in a propulsive, engaging way about past, present, and future roles of what goes on under the name 'design', Metahaven are far from simply affording some abstract surface nebulous value. On the contrary, they complexly explore a pertinent issue, presumably for the greater good. It's a deliberately debatable document – and this is one way they exceed the dreary template they otherwise portray as one big *fait accompli*.[29]

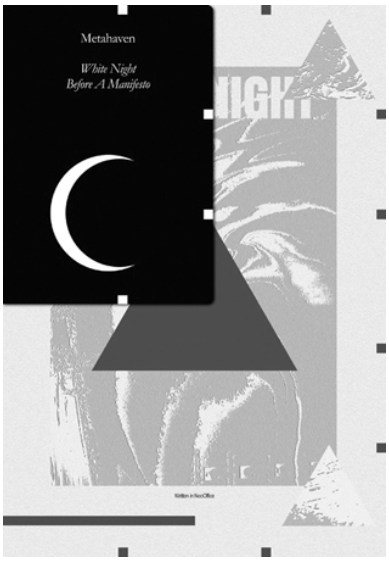
Here's an example of the sort of agency that Metahaven assert by design, demonstrating rather than articulating it. *White Night* concludes with a hanging question: namely, what happens to the traditionally declarative, outspoken statement of a manifesto once released from a corporeal carrier, when it's dispersed as immaterial, diffuse and freely manipulable information?

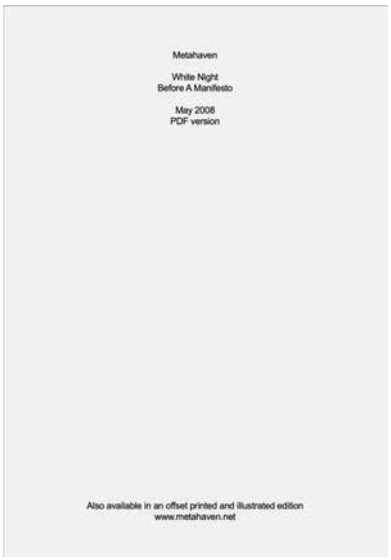
[27] Metahaven, eds., *Uncorporate Identity* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2010).

[28] Metahaven, *White Night Before a Manifesto* (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2008).

[29] David and I discuss the pamphlet's pros and cons in §9.4.

Only they don't just *ask* the question, but *embody* it by pointedly publishing the same document in two formats, one material and one immaterial, and strongly emphasizing (= drawing attention to) their contrasting qualities. The physical pamphlet (below left) makes the most of its 'object quality': it includes a functionally redundant but elaborate, embossed passport-style cover bound around the top left corner; the main body is on far thinner stock and runs to the number of pages that officially constitutes a pamphlet (i.e. the stereotypial manifesto format); and it's a showcase for contemporary digital ersatz, making extensive use of Adobe Photoshop filters and effects, approximating in print a bunch of stylistic features more native to the screen. In short, it *has the look of* surface, conferring value via ink on paper. The digital PDF (below right), meanwhile, is as zero-degree as it gets: black on white 12 pt. Helvetica, enabling it to be efficiently copy-pasted across other devices and platforms and so circulate as widely as possible. 'The hollows' is a term Metahaven coin in the document as referring to 'root-level' information below or in advance of the public interface; and this freely circulating, immaterial format has the look of raw material *before* the application of surface value.




*White Night*'s two distinct carriers are thus very much part of its point. This is precisely what an intelligently 'speculative' approach to graphic design can hope to achieve, i.e. to assemble 'extra-textual' qualities that are very much part of its 'text' in view of more robust, palpable, engaging and sophisticated meaning.

In any case, our considering *White Night* in this way gave us a handle on the Artists Space project. What seems obvious in retrospect was a revelation at the time: namely, that the *manner* of navigating a subject can be more or just as telling than the hard facts of what's being navigated. And so we began to read extensively about and around the subject of graphic identity, with a view to pointedly transforming the material. The aim became to project a history of graphic identity in such a way as to demonstrate a sense of design *counter to the one being narrated*. That is, to make something that would be, to a cartoonish degree, naked, direct and animated to counter its dilute, duplicitous and alienating subject.

## 8.7: QUOTED OUT OF CONTEXT

The rest of this chapter comprises the eventual script of our *'Identity'* projection, typographically formatted as follows for a small booklet made available to take away from the show. This booklet ended up an integral aspect of the exhibition, not least because the script was eventually composed entirely by quoting others' writing way out of context. While we were obviously mindful not to warp those words away from their original meanings, because we'd taken unusually reckless liberties in terms of truncating, paraphrasing or otherwise entirely reworking the material, we exhaustively compiled the original sources at the back of the booklet. One function this publication served, then,

was as an inventory of sources (and possibly a copyright loophole) – hence the easy-reference line numbers on the right-hand side of the script.

In this source section we reinstated as much of the script's fragments' surrounding text (including original orthography and spelling) as seemed necessary to reinstate the fullest sense of the doctored part. This often meant padding the excerpt with several paragraphs of the original (and in one special case even an entire piece: Terry Eagleton's fantastically merciless review of identity oracle Wally Olins' book *On Brand*. And so what's ostensibly an extended colophon or set of endnotes ended up more like an appendix of further reading that, even reduced to smallprint, ran to twice as many pages as the script itself.[30] We also came to consider the booklet as integral rather than supplementary to the projection, because it offered an audience the chance to digest what ended up being over 20 minutes of fairly relentless information in more conducive circumstances.

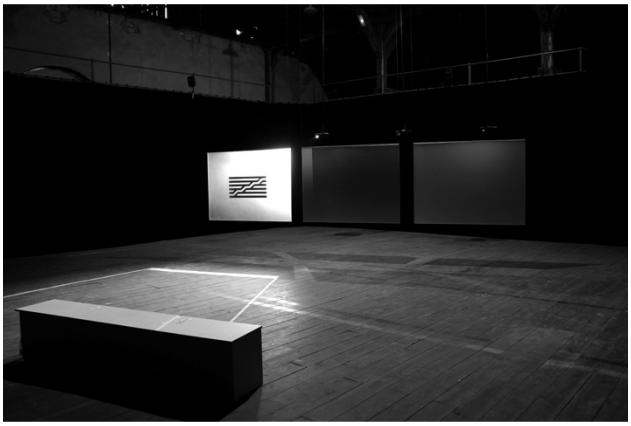
Here's how the whole thing was described on the wall, handout, and press release:

'The danger is that it's just talk. Then again, the danger is that it's not. I believe you can speak things into existence.' – Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 2010

*'Identity'* is an exhibition that charts the emergence and proliferation of graphic identity since the turn of the twentieth century, with particular reference to contemporary art institutions – museums, galleries, and so-called alternative spaces.

The period since the 1960s in particular has seen significant shifts in the perceived role of contemporary art in society, as well as the impact organizations displaying art have on economic and political infrastructures (and vice versa). *'Identity'* attempts to animate the typically fraught relationship between cultural and corporate spheres, as contemporary art institutions become increasingly preoccupied with their own image. How do changes in the graphic identities of art institutions over the last five decades reflect the shifting landscape of institutional policy and strategy? How does the conception of 'identity' – through an organization's use of graphic design, its marketing and branding – function to mediate between audience, artwork, and institution?

Initiated by Stefan Kalmár and Richard Birkett of Artists Space, *'Identity'* has been developed over a two-year period by Dexter Sinister – the working name of designers, publishers and writers Stuart Bailey and David Reinfurt – with research assistance from Robert Snowden. The resulting exhibition centers on a three-part projection that functions as part informational film, part minimalist cartoon. This audio-visual essay uses three case studies – London's Tate, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris – as coordinates from which to plot a broader landscape. Looking at the evolution of their 'brands' over the last 50 years, the film projects how art organizations negotiate their positions on a spectrum of ideology and economy.



[30] They are duly included in the Appendix here for the same reason.

The projection occupied three large adjacent screens hung in the middle of Artists Space. Each was devoted to one of three case studies: the Centre Pompidou on the left, MoMA in the middle, and the Tate on the right.



MoMA

TATE

The narrative jumps back and forth between the screens and their dedicated speakers, occasionally interrupted by brief overarching remarks (we thought of them as ‘koans’) that play on all three. Chronologically speaking, it proceeds backwards from the present day to conclude at the beginnings of graphic design:

RIGHT

2010: Open. Diverse. International. Entrepreneurial. Sustainable.
Always changing, always Tate.
Tate solid becomes Tate porous.
Tate foreground becomes Tate background.
Tate fixed-size becomes Tate flexible.

Branding is moving into nations, regions, cities and what is increasingly being described as the "third sector" – those cultural organizations that do not exist to make a profit.

Sometimes doubtfully, sometimes reluctantly, art institutions have adopted the idea of brand – usually in a limited way. Now they need to fully embrace it.

Branding used to involve stamping your symbol on the flank of some dumb creature, and nowadays involves stamping it across their T-shirts. Wally Olins, a man who one suspects would brand his own kneecaps if there was profit to be squeezed from it, has written a suitably slick account of a supremely shallow phenomenon.

"Brands," Olins argues, "represent identity." It may be that he himself only knows who he is because of his brand of underpants, but the more discerning among us have not yet been reduced to this tragic condition.

In the newly re-branded organization, the former Tate Gallery was re-named Tate Britain and the new one Tate Modern. What Olins was proposing was that the consumable brand was fluid. First came the brand then came the product.

ALL ALL ALL

The danger is that it's just talk; then again, the danger is that it's not. I believe you can speak things into existence.

1

RIGHT

2009: The director repeated his mantra: “all multi-arts spaces are re-thinking what they need to do.”

The new vision was one of flexibility, spontaneity and itinerant programming … a more fluid and decentered model … a sometime festival, a freeform space … a particular mood or movement … and an obsession with the mobile tastes of THE PUBLIC as the final arbiter of cultural value. All that matters is NOW.

CENTER

2004: “If you raise a lot of money, I will give you great, great architecture. But if you raise REALLY a lot of money, I will make the architecture disappear.”

So promised architect Yoshio Taniguchi when he began the revamp of the Museum of Modern Art. 450 million dollars later, his koan has stuck. The building’s hefty price tag seems to point to invisibility as a new kind of luxury.

The Museum also hired graphic designer Bruce Mau to redesign MoMA’s identity, but Mau felt the existing logo – set in Franklin Gothic type – should be left alone.

“Everybody gets tired of their own voice, and so they want to change it. But I was like: ‘Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.’”

Mau noticed, however, that somewhere in its evolution from the original 1902 metal type to the digital version, MoMA’s Franklin had lost some of its spirit.

The museum approached typographer Matthew Carter about “refreshing” the typeface – which was, he said, “like asking an architect to design an exact replica of a building.”

2

ALL ALL ALL

It's difficult to avoid putting these words in (quote) "quotation marks" (unquote) – they're so slippery in use.

CENTER

The new logo – rechristened MoMA Gothic – looks just like the old one, but stretched vertically one eight-hundredth of an inch. Yet this subtle addition, much like the Taniguchi building, represents an exorbitant amount of time, decision-making, collaborative effort, and money – in the low five figures. Will anyone notice?

Glenn D. Lowry stated: "I suspect that if we're really successful the public won't really notice the difference, it will just feel right."

What's behind MoMA's emphasis on invisibility? If this IS a carefully calculated exercise in branding, at least it's true to the museum's mission: less MoMA Incorporated than a bunch of aesthetes staring at the shape of their own name until their eyes cross.

LEFT

2000: What do you call this place?

Most of the time I say Beaubourg, or Pompidou, or Le Centre Pompidou. Let's meet at Beaubourg, let's meet at Pompidou, and so on. Most of the time it doesn't mean the museum as such, but the place – the building or the piazza in front of it.

Sometimes, I use another nickname: Pomps. I guess in English you'd write Pomp's. It's rather a private joke, with only a few friends. Like: Are you going to Pomp's?

More rarely, mostly in writing text messages and short emails to lesser friends, I sometimes say Pompompidou, or Pompompidou-

pou. Not that I think that Claude Pompidou was as glamourous as Betty Boop, but I really like alliterations.

RIGHT

1998: Two years before Tate Modern opened, Wolff Olins established "Ten principles of interpretation for Tate Gallery of Modern Art" – or TGMA as it was provisionally known.

One: TGMA acknowledges that there is not a single chronology of 20th century art, but many, and every work is capable of multiple readings.

Two: TGMA must enable people to be confident about their own feelings towards modern and contemporary art.

Three: Visitors' expectations, responses and experiences must be understood and must influence TGMA's policies and practice.

– and so on.

ALL ALL ALL

Look, there's Graphic Design moving away, followed by Marketing.

RIGHT

1997: The Design Council organized a discussion group to consider Britain's identity at the end of the century. Its findings were published in a paper called *New Brand for a New Britain* on the same day the Labour Party finally ousted the Conservative government. Aggressively rebranded NEW Labour, their campaign was based on an entirely new set of carefully created, honed and manipulated perceptions.

A further report, *Britain*™, begins: "Britain's identity is in flux.

Renewed confidence in the arts has coincided with the
departure from Hong Kong, devolution, integration with Europe,
and Princess Diana's death." It goes on to detail the degrees of
embarrassment "Britishness" provokes at home and abroad
– abundant with bad food, snobbery and poverty.

CENTER

The hiccups took decades to subside. It wasn't until the
mid-eighties that the museum deemed the lower-case-"o"-MoMA
proper enough for use. Another decade passed before the acronym
appeared on banners outside the museum.

RIGHT

1979: Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to
power and stayed there for the next 18 years. Two fundamental
pillars of Thatcherism were the privatization of the public sector
and the deregulation of the private sector.

The government necessarily understood the importance of how
things are sold, and initiated a full-blown love affair with advertising
and design.

The Department of Trade & Industry was itself given a makeover
by Wolff Olins: rechristened the DTI, with a zippy, lowercase logo
whose structural lines echoed the rising stock indices.

LEFT

1974: Six alternating black horizontal stripes, broken regularly by
eight 45-degree bends forms a continuous ziggurat of negative-
space running through from bottom-left to top-right. This is a
SYMBOL, the building abstracted. It was a compromise produced
by VDA, the design team led by Jean Widmer and Ernst Hiestand.

VDA argued that: “Opting for a descriptive logo would mean fixing Beaubourg in the present moment at the risk of its going out of fashion.” Still, pressed to develop ideas for a possible emblem, they presented this set of symbols:

a triangle for the music institute,
a circle for the industrial design center,
a diamond for the library,
and a square for the plastic arts

– all geometric forms that could fit together to constitute a single figure.

VDA’s objective, however, was to convince their clients that such a system was superfluous. It worked, symbols were duly dropped, and the team continued according to its initial proposal: no logo, no symbol.

The Centre Beaubourg is neither a bank nor an airport nor a grand hotel.

ALL ALL ALL

Above all, what counts is what’s done and lived rather than what is said: things count, not their appearances.

CENTER

1972: American designer Jay Doblin wrote that in order to learn to read logos you had to know at least 3,000 different signs – a task as complex as familiarizing oneself with Chinese ideograms.

He then asserted the uselessness of such symbols: total wastes of time and money – rumor had invoices rising to $100,000.

Concluding his diatribe, Doblin suggested abandoning logos to

their fatal perversity and adopting typography instead: “A little Helvetica lowercase can get the job done.”

LEFT

1971: Just a few years after May ’68, logos were in a state of crisis, thought of as a marketing ploy, ideologically contemptible, and so totally at odds with the ambition of a cultural institution.

The new civic arts center in the heart of Paris planned to bring four existing institutions together under one roof, including the National Museum of Modern Art.

As there was no particular need to identify the new center beyond its location, it was provisionally called the Centre Beaubourg, after the neighborhood in the Marias district. Eventually it was given a proper name to honor the former Conservative prime minister.

CENTER

1966: On summer vacation in Vermont, the Museum of Modern Art’s first director, Alfred Barr, had a typographic epiphany. The museum’s official abbreviation, MOMA, would, he thought, be better served by a lowercase “o.” A colleague responded:

Dear Helen and Alfred,

Haven’t you two characters got anything better to do than spend an entire summer haggling over the problem of whether the abbreviation should be written as MOMA or MoMA?

I must say that in this instance I think the lady is right. In all my 85 years in the museum it never occurred to me to use a lowercase “o.” It may be correct but it gives me terrible visual hiccups. I can only conclude that the estimable A.H. Barr Junior is losing

his sight and mind in Greensboro.

RIGHT

1965: Founded by Michael Wolff and Wally Olins, self-styled brand consultancy Wolff Olins was one of the first agencies of its kind. Although commonplace today, the notion of creating a portrait of a company – and subsequently beautifying that picture – was almost unheard of.

The phrase "corporate identity" was coined in the 1950s to describe how all of an organization's visible manifestations are designed to create a coherent whole associated with a specific theme, attitude, or personality.

Rationalizing the choice of such symbols became part of the practice: "Incisive, balanced, open, its personality does not represent any particular specialization."

CENTER

1964: The lettering for the Museum of Modern Art was created by Chermayeff & Geismar, who also designed logos for American Airlines, Xerox, and Mobil, among others. They were hired to create "a clean and straightforward typographic identity to reflect the museum's major renovation."

According to Chermayeff, Franklin Gothic is "a face that's modern with roots … It has some character, and therefore some warmth about it, and some sense of the hand – i.e., the artist. It makes a lot of sense for the Museum, which is not only looking to the future but also looking to the past."

"It is obvious to us that unless a symbol is truly appropriate to the Museum, it is better not to have one ... We tried a number of different directions, none of which led to any satisfactory solutions,

perhaps because there IS no one symbol of modern art."

ALL ALL ALL

An "image" is not simply a trademark, a design, a slogan, or an easily-remembered picture. It is a studiously crafted personality profile.

CENTER

1956: It was by elaborate design that the cumbersome name "International Business Machines Corporation" was made in the public mind into "IBM," probably the most expensive and most valuable abbreviation in history.

A team led by Eliot Noyes developed its streamlined trademark, to project a (quote) "clean, impressive" image.

ALL ALL ALL

When we use the word image, we plainly confess a distinction between what we see and what is really there – and we express our preferred interest in what is to be seen.

CENTER

1935: In a note on his emblem for Black Mountain College, Josef Albers stated:

"We are not enamored of astrological, zoological, heraldic, or cabalistic fashions. We have hunted neither the phoenix nor the unicorn, we have dug up no helmet and plume, nor have we tacked on learned mottoes. Instead, as a symbol of union, we have chosen simply a simple ring. It is an emphasized ring to emphasize coming together. Or, it is one circle within another: color and white, light and shadow, in balance. And that no one may puzzle

over cryptic monograms, we give our full address."

RIGHT

1932: The name The Tate Gallery officially replaced The National Gallery, Millbank, itself shortened a decade earlier from The National Gallery of British Art.

CENTER

1929: The Museum of Modern Art opened nine days after the Wall Street Crash as the first major American institution to exhibit European Modernism.

For the first 30 years, the Museum was known by its full name, rendered in geometric letterforms typical of the Bauhaus, and Modernism generally.

The clear geometric form is one of the most easily comprehended. Every possible form lies dormant in these basic elements. They are visible to him who sees, invisible to him who does not.

This profile, in various versions, represented the Bauhaus at Weimar, Dessau, and Chicago. It replaced this original Bauhaus symbol, more akin to a Mason's mark.

Around this time, German electrical company AEG put architect, engineer and designer Peter Behrens on retainer as artistic consultant, in charge of designing products such as bulbs, kettles and heaters, as well as the company's logotype, publicity, and even buildings.

Behrens wanted to reduce objects and icons to essential – or "typical" – forms: geometrical motifs and streamlined curves ... the design of objects to approximate as closely as possible their function, and the design of the icons that represent them

to approximate as closely as possible to the information they are supposed to provide about those objects.

ALL ALL ALL

All we want to do is to show that there is a difference between an urn and a chamberpot, and that in this difference there is leeway for culture.

LEFT

“Beau-bourg” means “beautiful village,” but in the 19th century the area was known as “L’îlot insalubre numéro un” – or “Filthy island number 1.”

RIGHT

1897: What became Tate emerged at the end of the 19th century, when philanthropic sugar magnate Henry Tate donated his collection of 65 Modern paintings to the existing National Gallery of British Art.

All the Tate’s official communications material for at least the first 75 years bore the Royal Coat of Arms, the de facto image of all national public institutions.

Heraldry is a graphic language evolved from around the 12th century to identify families, states and other social groups. Specific visual forms yield specific meanings, and any heraldic device is described by both a written description or BLAZON, and its corresponding graphic form.

Blazons follow a strict set of rules described by an eccentric vocabulary derived from French aristocracy. The division of a shield, for example, is described in terms such as DEXTER, which means “right,” and SINISTER, which means “left.”

A given heraldic form may be drawn in many alternative ways, all considered equivalent, just as the letter A may be printed in a variety of fonts.

ALL ALL ALL

No two things or acts are identical. Every act is an invention, yet we can grasp the universe only by simplifying it with ideas of identity by class, types, and categories.

LEFT

1883: Who hasn't felt a disconnect when gazing in the art world's rear view mirror – a chasm separating earlier cultures from our own? Transformations in material culture deserve much of the credit – which is one good reason why Manet's *A Bar at Folies-Bergère* is exceptional.

Look at the counter. You'll see two bottles of Bass Pale Ale, with their familiar red triangle logo. It's a brand that many of us know first hand. Seeing it in the painting connects us in a wink with the late 19th century. All at once, via a commercial logo, we've discovered a bridge over that cultural chasm.

Manet's painting must also be our longest-running example of product placement. Marketers at Bass exult: 128 years of exposure to the brand in galleries and art books – that's a lot of eyeballs!

RIGHT

1875: A trademark is a legally protected set of letters, a picture, or a design, identifying a particular product.

Most casual drinkers, and even some very serious ones, don't know that the red triangle which adorns every bottle is the first

trademark issued in the UK.

In fact, when the Trade Mark Registration Act became law,
an employee of the Bass brewing company stood on line all night
to make sure that the Red Triangle would be the first on the
books, closely followed by a Red Diamond for their strong ale,
and a blue triangle for their filtered, pasteurized version.

ALL ALL ALL

General signs – square, circle, triangle – together form the basic
plastic language.

LEFT

The square represents the world and denotes order.

RIGHT

The circle is the traditional symbol of eternity and the heavens.

CENTER

The triangle is a symbol of generative power and spiritual unity.
Although these broad interpretations occur in many cultures
throughout history, because of their formal simplicity they can be
invested with infinite subjective meanings.

ALL ALL ALL

Now a complex interplay of motive forces is envisaged, a
configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure.

CENTER

The goal is to deconstruct and expand upon a binary. Logically

enough, the way to move beyond a pair of binary opposites is to
TRI-ANGU-LATE. 470

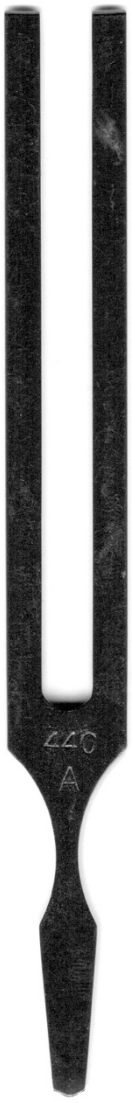
It's obvious when you think about it in terms of simple geometry, and it invokes a baseline metaphor about the development of ideas. Two points in opposition form one axis. To get beyond, therefore, one adds a second dimension, the simplest structure of which is a triangle. This creates a FIELD.

This is a PROJECTION:

A
NEW
SYMBOL
PROPOSED
& PROJECTED
INSIDE THIS SPACE
IS (LIKE EVERY LOGO)
ALL SURFACE: A BUBBLE
BLOWN AROUND NOTHING
INFLATED TO BURSTING POINT
BY THE LAZY ASSUMPTION THAT
WHAT WE LOOK LIKE IS WHO WE ARE
IN OTHER WORDS, “IDENTITY” = IDENTITY

That calligrammish triangle on the final page ended up being the only bit of text in the whole script we wrote from scratch, i.e. that wasn't borrowed and amended. It was intended in good faith as a nagging, hanging question without a question mark.

The regular Artists Space logo was supplanted by this 'hollows' version for the run of the show – in all printed and electronic communications, and on flags announcing the show in the neighbourhood.
We even tried to bring the whole project full circle by proposing that the text triangle ought to replace the usual version for good – and so become the actual new identity after all. Apparently that was a step too far, for the solid, surface version was reinstated as soon as the projection came down.




Tuning fork

# 9: GREY AREA

This is the last bit of theory before concluding with the elaborate practice of time travel. Here I want to hone in on the peculiar *nature* of the work being done by Dexter Sinister and their ilk – meaning whoever else is applying the ways and means of graphic design to indeterminate ends in the contexts of contemporary art. What is it they think they're doing, exactly?

At various points in these pages I've noted that, over the past few decades, the channels for a socially-oriented graphic design practice have been largely eradicated by an all-pervasive corporate sensibility that prioritizes profit over culture – and hence bureaucratic concerns over aesthetic ones. This is the province of focus groups, marketing and Public Relations departments for whom design is synonymous with mediation, typically done by committee under the banner of *creativity* and the mindset of *branding*. It results in a social environment dominated by dilute, bland, monotonous forms: the look of the lowest common denominator. How to work against it, or in spite of it?

The first section, 'Surplus to requirements', quickly recounts a recently written dictionary entry on 'graphic design' in order to consider its very *lack* of definition. 'Orphaned interests' notes how those designers with a humanist urge to resist capitulating to big business have branched out into more diverse roles. This is followed by a lengthy talk concerning the work of Richard Hollis, a graphic designer and historian,[1] whose own practice is as telling as the work he writes about. The trajectory of his career traces how the role of the graphic designer has changed in the past half-century or so.

Hollis always considered graphic design a kind of 'social work'. If his career traces the diminishing agency of the graphic designer (at least in the form conceived by his generation), the next section tells how the assorted venues of contemporary art have become productive places to work out the same progressive impulse – crudely put, to make the world a better place to live – via a certain breed of interrogative, philosophically-inclined projects at the art end of design and the design end of art. In a long conversation, 'The morning after', David and I discuss what's good and bad about *White Night Before a Manifesto* (2004), a polemical pamphlet made by a couple that operate in the same grey area as ourselves, self-titled 'speculative designers' Metahaven. This document became a useful means of refracting some awkward concerns inherent in our own enterprise.[2] According to the pamphlet, the role of the contemporary designer is bleak and uncompromising, yet their own practice suggests something far more hopeful and constructive. Indeed, Metahaven's Daniel van der Velden has proposed that designers ought to applying their expertise in view of designing themselves a whole new vocation.

With this in mind, 'Anatomy of a duckrabbit' tries to nail the benefits of the art/design hybrid, i.e. the particular qualities of those respective artist/designer dispositions supposedly being merged. The popular duckrabbit is emblematic of the way of working promulgated by this thesis, which is in turn offered as a proof of that maxim that served as our starting point: *form must be a way of thinking*. I consider how this borderline art/design work usefully registers aspects of our condition in a similar way Eco's Open Works did 50 years beforehand – and how it might continue to do so.

## 9.1: SURPLUS TO REQUIREMENTS

In an astute summary of Stefan Themerson's Semantic Translation,[3] Mike Sperlinger noted that the 'clarification of meaning' that the technique supposedly offers is essentially parodic. By satirically replacing worn-out clichés with their dictionary definitions, what's *actually* being clarified, he says, is that it's impossible to truly clarify meaning, because 'meaning will always escape and proliferate'.

[1] Richard already cropped up in dialogue with Robin Kinross in §7.2.

[2] *White Night* was aready briefly noted as food for the thinking behind *'Identity'* in §9.4.

[3] For a full description of Semantic Translation, see §7.5. Mike's comments are drawn from his introduction to the film *Stefan Themerson & Language* in *Dot Dot Dot* #17, 2008.

As Themerson often reminded us, ‘the world is more complicated than the language we use to talk about it; therefore it must also be more complicated than the truths about it which we express in that language’.[4]

I had this in mind when asked to suggest a definition of ‘graphic design’ for a new *Design Dictionary* in 2008:[5]

Rather than the way things work, Graphic Design is still largely (popularly) perceived as referring to the way things look: surface, style, and increasingly, spin. It is written about and documented largely in terms of its representation of the zeitgeist. In recent decades, Graphic Design has become associated foremost with commerce, becoming virtually synonymous with corporate identity and advertising, while its role in more intellectual pursuits is increasingly marginalized. Furthermore, through a complex of factors characteristic of late Capitalism, many of the more strategic aspects of Graphic Design are now undertaken by those working in ‘middle-management’ positions, typically Public Relations or Marketing departments. Under these conditions, those operating under the title Graphic Designer tend to be responsible mainly for those aspects of production (typesetting, page makeup, programming) at the tail-end of this system.

On the other hand, in line with the ubiquitous fragmentation of post-industrial society into ever-smaller coteries, there exists an international scene of Graphic Designers who typically make work independent of the traditional external commission, in self-directed or collaborative projects with colleagues in neighboring disciplines. Such work is typically marked by its experimental and personal nature, generally well documented and circulated in a wide range of media.

As these two aspects of Graphic Design – the overtly commercial and the overtly marginal – grow increasingly distinct, this schizophrenia renders the term increasingly vague and useless. At best, this implies that the term ought always to be distinctly qualified by the context of its use.

On reading this passive-aggressive anti-definition, a friend complained it was far too subjective. He added that it might be a good idea to subject it to an objective Semantic Translation. I think he was joking, but I duly outsourced the task to a group of design students, partly in order to find out how accurate they thought my original description was, and partly because I thought it would be a productive task for them. I split the definition into bite-size sentences and randomly assigned them to the class. Here’s one such chunk from the end of my definition’s first paragraph, after it had passed through the semantic mangle of one of the students:

> Additionally, through a group of related circumstances contributing to the descriptions of recent profit-based trade, many of the more carefully planned features of the art or profession of visual communication that combines images, words, or ideas, are undertaken by those earning income at the level just below that of senior administrators, typically those helping to maintain a favourable public image or those in the territorial divisions of an aggregate of functions involved in moving goods from producer to consumer.

I can’t say the rewrite changed my mind about the validity of my definition, but it was a productive exercise for the following reason. Because so many of the sentences dispersed among the students contained the same base terms, not least ‘graphic design’ itself, when we came to recombine them back into one collectively-translated composite, their new ‘definitions’ of the same word were paradoxically so *diverse* that we were forced to settle on one – *which effectively meant amalgamating a few* – in order to make the composite version clear and consistent. In other words, we were impelled to transform a batch of relatively specific meanings into more diffuse, abstract ones in view of their broader

[4] Stefan Themerson, ‘Before publication’, an interview with Stefan Themerson on Radio Polskie, Warsaw, April 2, 1964.

[5] Michael Erhoff, Tim Marshall, eds., *Design Dictionary* (Berlin: Birkhauser, 2008).

application by a larger number of people. This amounted to a bracingly empirical lesson in the knotted implications of definition and democracy.

Another interlocutor argued that my definition pulled its punches by not pointing to the more fundamental point that the overtly commercial and overtly marginal poles of graphic design are equally impotent: the commercial end inasmuch as the kind of work typically commissioned by corporate enterprises has become insipid and innocuous, stuck in a loop of catering to market-researched demands that are themselves based on desires based on the previous round of market-researched demands; the marginal end because its intellectual collateral, i.e. personal interest and investment, is predominantly hobbyist, and so devoid of social or political motivation and efficacy.

The same colleague argued that the role of design has rotated 180 degrees from *solving problems* to *creating desires*; and that, regardless of whether these desires are pointed towards commercial or intellectual ends, they are always essentially surplus to requirements, i.e. trivial and inconsequential, without urgency. In his view, the serious contemporary designer ought to design him- or herself a new role altogether – a 'research' position devoted to entirely speculative projects with no obligation to produce actual products; a breed of graphic design roughly equivalent to what's meant by 'paper architecture'.

## 9.2: ORPHANED INTERESTS

In view of joining the ends of the circle of this thesis, I want to reiterate some of the ideas that cropped up in a letter reproduced back in chapter 2 concerning the way graphic designers have assimilated other roles in the broader ecology of the communications industry. Back then I described these orphaned interests as 'lost'.[6]

Based on my own experience and others' accounts, it's safe to say that in earlier eras of graphic design's relatively short history (a hundred years, more or less) there used to be many more prospects – avenues, opportunities, incentives, enthusiasm – for the socially-minded, *constructive* graphic designer than are apparent today. With national bias, I'm thinking in particular of design groups in the wake of the Second World War like Design Research Unit, or the long-term legacy of famously 'design-conscious' public institutions such as London Underground, British Rail and the Department of Transport.

In these and other cases, design was more plausibly considered a form of 'civil service'. Paul Stiff sums up the conspicuously 'modern' approach of this milieu as one of 'articulate advocacy', concerned with shaping 'a visual argument or persuasive statement' by deploying 'a wider range of verbal and visual resources than imagined by printers or commercial artists.'[7] Such positivism was applied to a wide variety of everyday products and services intended to make the world more convenient and efficient, namely timetables, signage systems, maps, government forms and other civic printed matter; basically, the sort of work that 'aims to be ameliorative, prescribes improvement, and flourishes best within conditions of well-grounded optimism about social progress.'[8]

Naturally all these items are still made in one form or another. The point is, they're no longer being made by designers working from the bottom up, but by bureaucrats operating from the top down. It's broadly acknowledged, too, that designers in the cultural and even commercial sectors were similarly more *involved,* and so more *engaged*, during, say, the middle third of the 20th century. They were involved from the outset, working not only at the surface of communication (i.e. at the level of composition, colour, etc.), but equally *in depth* (i.e. equally responsible for thinking through the

[6] See §2.3(c).

[7] Paul Stiff, Introduction to *Typography Papers 8: Modern typography in Britain; graphic design, politics, and society*, 2008, p. 4.

[8] Ibid.

context, format, language, etc.). The designer's current role, by contrast, is more akin to a software operator who works at the 5% tail-end of the design process, applying relatively superfluous form to things that have, to all intents and purposes, been 95% designed by someone else already.

This is obviously a massive generalization. There are still certain pockets where a plausibly 'social' graphic design can flourish, driven by cultural forces other than quantification – in the realm of infographics, for instance, such as the daily diagrams made by the in-house team at *The New York Times*. Still, the general decline is patent enough. Most contemporary graphic design discourse today tends to invoke a zero-sum distinction between 'commercial' and 'cultural' work, with the 'social' an excluded middle. That 'cultural' is generally taken to mean the arts (and sometimes charities); but as cultural institutions and products are fast becoming just as subservient to market forces as any other more overtly profit-seeking enterprise, even these two categories barely hold. A more accurate division can be drawn between 'commercial' and 'uncommercial' work.

The American pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James once wrote: 'The currents once in, must find a way out.'[9]

There have been plenty of marginal, experimental attempts by graphic designers to avoid or defer capitulating to the corporate default, not least the inclination to simply *branch out*, seeking roles where designing frays into other aspects of publishing. The trend recalls Walter Benjamin's call (back in the 1930s) to look beyond the default forms of a given milieu and get involved with its root-level mechanisms.[10] Countless imprints, stores, spaces and schools have emerged from the orphaned interests of the 'committed' design scene – publishing, writing, selling, producing, manufacturing, organising events, and so on. Definitively set against the mainstream, such enterprises are naturally precarious, usually in search of cash and an audience, and frequently short-lived. But there have been notable successes.

However, in view of the myriad private presses and other very local publishing projects that populate the surprising number of art-inflected book fairs in New York, Berlin, London, and so on, design critic Andrew Blauvelt has rightly noted that the process of making the product has seemingly become more important than the result.[11] In other words, the production *is* the product – the books and magazines and websites and any of the other *nominal* 'goods' being produced by this scene are carrots and red herrings. Such culturally invested yet utterly marginal publishing seems increasingly anaemic because it's foremost made for the people who made it.

Design for design's sake doesn't make nearly as much sense as art for art's sake does. If profit-based commercial design work is more or less a superficial add-on to what are usually already luxury products targeted at mass markets, the uncommercial counterpart is generally drawn from someone's personal, niche interests with no real profit motive and no urgent need for an audience either. Such productions inevitably foster a certain amount of community and goodwill, and it would be churlish to see this as negative; but in being so self-serving they're not really 'socially-oriented' in that former sense either. It's hard not to sense a considerable amount of denial in this scene – a communal delusion that what's being produced has more cultural reach, agency and effect than is actually the case.

If the situation is confused and confusing, one thing's clear enough: we're no longer working within 'conditions of well-grounded optimism about social progress' that Paul Stiff deemed necessary for a properly constructive approach.

[9] James, 'Habit', op. cit.

[10] See §1.4.

[11] Andrew Blauvelt, 'Tool (Or, Postproduction for the Graphic Designer)' in: Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton, eds., *Now in Production* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Gallery, 2012).

## 9.3: THE TRUTH ABOUT HOLLIS

The following talk was delivered at Artists Space in New York as part of a retrospective of Richard Hollis's work that I co-curated with design critic Emily King.[12] Like many other sections, it could easily have been slotted into other chapters – to illustrate the notions of work in movement or articulate objects, for instance. (Since all are constituent of the same general set of working principles, this shouldn't be too surprising.) It ended up here near the end, though, in view of summarizing a lot of what's gone before, such as the inflections of 'modernism' mentioned in the opening paragraphs, or the elaboration of technical processes native to graphic design; as well as serving as a concerete case of how a formerly more autonomous, engaged vocation became eroded by social, political and economic forces.

Back in the exhibition, on one wall we projected footage of Hollis speaking about his work in front of an audience in London a couple of weeks beforehand, then organized his work to match to the sequence of his presentation in order that an audience could walk through the work in sync with his account. As such, I tried to avoid repeating here what he was articulating there.

Much of what I'm going to say tonight about Richard Hollis's work follows in the large footprints of British typographer, publisher and design historian Robin Kinross, who was the first to pinpoint the particularity of Richard's work in an article titled 'The New Tradition' back in the late 1980s.[13] Robin used the term to flag the fact that Richard's work is very much *its own thing* – an approach rooted in the modern movement, yet worked out in a unique way – personally, practically and pragmatically; 'on the ground', so to speak.

In recuperating that largely lapsed term 'the modern movement', I mean to emphasize a specific set of attitudes related to, yet essentially distinct from, more commonplace conceptions of modernism. 'Modernism' is of course a famously slippery and promiscuous term, and one reason for supplanting it here is to avoid its hydra-headedness, which tends to blur into useless ambiguity. More specifically, then, by 'modern movement' I'm alluding to a markedly socially grounded and implicitly socialist denomination of modernism, contrary to a set of stylistic tropes particularly common to the conception of the term over here in North America.

Generalizing wildly, I could summarize this even more specifically *New York*-based idea of modernism in terms of fine art with reference to Clement Greenberg's definition of the term as the self-awareness of a medium, working towards the realization of its most fundamental characteristic (most famously the 'flatness' of painting). Or I could equally summarize it in graphic design terms by pointing to the elemental forms and one-liner concepts that characterized the huge amount of work developed for advertising and big business from around the 1950s onwards.

By contrast, the modern movement I have in mind has less to do with form or style, but consists rather in an attitude or disposition. There's a rhetorical shortcut to all this: I want to isolate the 'movement' from the 'modern'. Fundamentally, I think this is what Richard did: he took modernism and ran with it.

Now, as well as being a graphic designer, Richard is also an important design historian and, to a lesser degree, a theorist. Actually, it's more accurate to say he was a very good distiller and synthesizer of other people's theories as part and parcel of his histories. He dislikes overly academic writing, and expressly avoided what he considered unnecessarily technical jargon such as 'signifier' and 'signified' – but he was always careful to explain *why* he was avoiding it too. He writes as engagingly and understandably for as wide an audience as possible, and this is one of many subtle ethical aspects of his work: both the stuff that he makes, and his accounts of other people's stuff, are unusually clear-headed and generous.

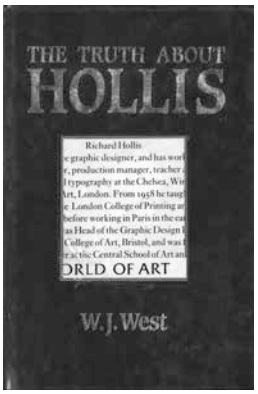
[12] *Richard Hollis*, Artists Space, 21 September – 10 November, 2013. Richard was introduced earlier in the thesis, in §7.2.

[13] Robin Kinross, 'The New Tradition', Blueprint, no. 46 (April 1988), pp.38–39.

A teacher of mine once said to me: *understand history and the present will take care of itself*. Richard is a prime case in point. He has his interests, obsessions and influences like anyone else, but over 50 years of work he also properly digested and transformed them. Morevover, he's a rare instance of someone *equally* accomplished as a historian and a practitioner, and both roles significantly feed each other. In this sense he lives in the same place in my mind as Jean-Luc Godard. It always amazed me to discover Godard was an encyclopaedic and outspoken film critic years before making films. How did he manage, I wondered, to make that first propulsive decade of movies without being hindered if not entirely paralyzed by the weight of his own theoretical upbringing, as is surely far more common?

Graphic design is famously alien to art galleries, because it's quoted so far out of context as to alien*ate* any audience trying to grasp what makes it good. Let's begin with a definition. Richard has a very nice way of defining graphic design that's counter-intuitively straightforward – like much of his work. 'Graphic design', he says, 'is what is made by graphic designers.' It's a deceptive tautology. He's not being funny; he's making the point that the vast majority of things that are categorically graphic weren't necessarily designed – laid out, configured, articulated – by someone who considers him- or herself a designer. Graphic design on Richard's terms, then, is work made by someone well aware that they're *in the business of manipulating text and image, ideally according to meaning*.

I'm deliberately using the word 'ideally' there, because with this redundant-sounding definition Richard means to imply that this awareness is *critical* – that's to say, *self-doubting* and *constructive*. And from here it's only a short jump to say that graphic design is something made by someone *committed* to the idea that the practice has its own histories, theories and peculiarities. For him, then, calling something graphic design is already a value judgment, and on more than one occasion he's lamented that this sense – of engagement with the discipline, of *the discipline of the discipline* – is increasingly scarce. I'm not sure I *entirely* agree with that, though I know why Richard thought so considering where the field seemed to be headed back in the early 1990s when he said it. More on this later.




This book jacket – not to be taken very seriously, mainly to show where the talk's title comes from – has been on a high shelf in the toilet next to Richard's basement studio in London's Clerkenwell for as long as I can remember, which is to say around 1995 when I started working with him. It was a few years before I actually pulled it off the shelf to discover the cover had been doctored by a friend to include a fragment from a biographical note in one of Richard's books. Anyway, back then Richard had just bought his first Apple Mac and wanted me to show him how to use it. I was just as interested in learning from him what's known as 'paste-up' – a technique that was then fast approaching extinction.

Richard always says that graphic design can be considered in terms of three key aspects – social, technical and aesthetic; but that far too much attention is devoted in writing and teaching to the aesthetic at the expense of the other two, in which case you miss at least 66% of what's interesting about a given piece of work. With this in mind, I'll start with an overview of the technical aspect in the time of Richard's work; the social and aesthetic ones will emerge in due course.

The work upstairs crosses three technical paradigms, beginning in the 1950s with letterpress (a process that had remained largely unchanged since Gutenberg's invention of moveable metal type in the first half of the 15th century). The emerging figure of the graphic designer typically provided instructions for a printer to follow when assembling the metal or wooden type into a frame from which

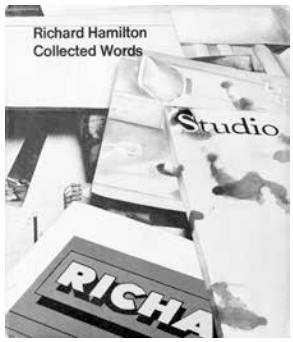
to pull an impression, sometimes together with engraved images. The designer had to specify his desires in the language of the printer and photoengraver. He was limited by the types the particular printer had in stock, and other factors such as the formats available on specific machines.

Next, photosetting and offset printing began to supplant letterpress during the 1960s. Here the designer was required to literally paste up bits of paper – strips of type known as galleys, perhaps supplemented with dry transfer lettering, handwriting, or even sticking together words letter-by-letter, combined with photographs or drawings. The composite result was itself photographed and a printing plate made from the negative. Designers had their own process cameras and made their own halftone images, the equivalent of scanning an image today. As such, they began to take control of the production process.

And photosetting has in turn been superseded since the late 1980s by computer page-makeup, which of course involves programming digital instructions in order to output on-off ink values to make plates, without the need to go through a middleman.

You can clearly see the traces of each of these processes – from letterpress through photosetting to computer page-makeup – across the chronology of the work upstairs. The middle process of paste-up – to make master sheets for photosetting – was probably used to make the majority of it. Richard often emphasizes how fundamentally *physical* graphic designing was before the advent of personal computers. As this book cover for Rod van Uchelen's *Production Techniques and New Applications* (1977) suggests, paste-up epitomizes this physicality, assembling what's essentially the final material to be reproduced *at actual size*. This is very different from designing for print on a computer, in virtual space and likely not at the same scale as the object itself (unless it's a web page or digital document, of course) and therefore at a far greater remove which, make no mistake, affects things enormously.




Incidentally, the British pop artist Richard Hamilton appears to have paid homage – or ripped off – the *Paste Up* cover for his 1980 book of *Collected Writing*; and actually it's instructive to consider the work of Richards Hamilton and Hollis in parallel, as similar temperaments working respectively in art and design during the same postwar period. Both worked freely across a wide variety of media, both were firmly rooted in their disciplines' respective histories, and their work is similarly marked by a strong literary interest. The key difference is that where Hamilton articulates his own interests, Hollis articulates those of others; but in my opinion the similarities are greater than this disciplinary divergence, not least in that they both somehow managed to stay young – by which I just mean their work never seemed to slip from anything other than a state of total engagement.

To reiterate slightly, the perennial problem of a show like this, endemic to showing any graphic design in a gallery, is that it's by no means given that a viewer comprehends how it was made and in what context – and both can directly affect the way it looks. The danger is that you read the form as though it sprang fully formed from the designer's mind, in which case you tend to read it as an exercise in style, as formalism to compare and contrast with, say, Art Nouveau or International Style or the posters of Toulouse Lautrec. This is what happens if you're unable to adequately deconstruct the work.
By which I don't mean to tick the boxes of French theory, only emphasize that you can learn about graphic designing by performing a kind of calculus on it. By *mentally dismantling* a piece of graphic design you can understand how to *do* graphic design – and other things besides. So another claim I'll make for Richard's work is that, for those inclined to look for it, it is unusually *didactic*.

In a published conversation from 1992, Richard talks with Robin Kinross about *Graphic Design: a Concise History*, a book that Richard was then in the process of compiling, and which came out two years later.[14] Richard is very digressive in conversation, and it's useful to see how this character trait feeds and feeds into his graphic work – as open-mindedness made manifest. Robin, who edited the conversation, clearly understood this, and so the final version includes a number of incidental digressions. For instance, they're in the middle of talking about those differences between European and American modernism when Richard happens to look out of the window and notice two contrasting British Telecom vans. BT were the sole public telecommunications company in the UK until 1984 when it was typically privatized by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government.




At first, Richard thinks the vehicle behind is an old one over-painted by another company, then realizes it's actually BT's newly implemented identity. The pied piper motif was designed by Wolff Olins, the trailblazing design firm who more or less single-handedly introduced the concept of Corporate Identity – the wholesale repackaging of a company's image according to how it wanted to be perceived, thus inaugurating the era of spin doctoring that, in the UK at least, reached some kind of logical conclusion in Tony Blair's New Labour.




Incredibly enough, then, this snapshot of the two vans freeze-frames a shift in graphic design corollary to the socio-political moment, away from the sort of ubiquitous second-generation geometric abstraction rooted in modernist ideas of social construction – however flawed or naive – and towards an era dominated by Public Relations and marketing. Robin adroitly describes Wolff Olins' piper as 'such a pathetic, wispy image – pipe-dreams', and in actual fact it was publicly reviled as the 'prancing ponce'. Later, as the vans drive off, Richard exclaims, 'It's incredible: the old van and the new van. You see: there's "graphic design" moving away, followed by "marketing".'[15]

And just to give you a further idea of the sharp and *answerable* nature of their dialogue, in a later section concerning the work of the Swiss typographer Jan Tschichold, modernist graphic design's first and most eloquent propagator, Robin wonders whether Richard is talking and writing about design purely in terms of 'formal values' or 'stylization'. In other words, he accuses him precisely of isolating aesthetics from context and technics. Richard insists not; what he's trying to do, he says, is work backwards to get at the embedded attitudes that *underpin* the work. Compared to the 'heroic' modernists like Tschichold, he says, there's now a scarcity of serious thinking behind what is, in the end, a *social service* – which is why 'bad or incoherent design is offensive.' He illustrates the point by reading an excerpt from the current draft of his book-in-progress, a description of this poster by Tschichold:

[14] More on this in §7.2.

[15] See also the script for *'Identity'* in §8.7, which included this line.




> This is a poster of extreme economy and precision. The image is a photograph in negative, its left-hand edge on the centre of the sheet. The word-element 'photograph' starts at the edge of the image. This is overprinted on the image, and so forms a unit of meaning with it, and is the first part of a subtitle 'his apparatus'. The second half of the subtitle, 'his works' is placed after a dash. The dash bridges between the image area and the white paper of the sheet, so that the works are literally the outcome of the process. The rest of the textual information is related by size and position according to its importance. 'Where' is aligned horizontally with 'what'. This is related vertically to 'who' at the top, and the start of the main title below ...[16]

– and so on.

This sort of work can therefore be *properly* labelled 'heroic' because so much attention was dedicated to its realization using brand new technical means without reference to established conventions. A huge amount of intelligence is duly compressed into these pioneering artefacts that record the development of a graphic language. Now, 'graphic language' is the sort of term that tends to get bandied about a lot in design discourse, its meaning vague enough to sound profound when it's usually another euphemism for formalism. But thanks to the sharply focused lens of Richard's patient description, here you can appreciate how Tschichold's poster is arranged according to *a plausible grammar*. It *explicitly makes sense*, and so the idea of a 'graphic language' carries some weight.

Richard goes on to say that such innovation can be distinguished from its later imitation by a certain 'finesse' and 'conviction'. However, as these essential qualities are all but impossible to glean by looking at tiny pictures of physical objects, his extensive written descriptions are designed foremost to compensate for the information lost in translation, to reinstate in text what's lost in the image. By writing so rigorously about the technical processes at play in the work, thanks to his first-hand understanding of them as a practising designer, Richard demonstrates how to 'read' it. He gives you the tools *and* shows how to use them.

This is the real purpose of writing a history, he concludes; and against the likely demands of his publishers, whom he predicts will argue, *why provide a lengthy, ink- and time-consuming description of an image that's already in front of the reader?*, he'll answer: because without a proper understanding of

[16] Kinross and Hollis, op. cit., p. 84.

the social and technical conditions under which is was made, which is more or less inevitable if they haven't lived through the period in question or produced these things in the same way, the reader won't be equipped to read them *correctly*. The graphic literacy that Richard's writing teaches allows you to apprehend the depth of thinking that went into the work. Without it, you limit the extension of your own knowledge and so lose the full constructive effect. Graphic design then becomes simply – and boringly – an exercise in formalism: elements arranged one way or another, big or small, red or green, top or bottom … *whatever*.

Robin then nicely points out that Richard is acting just as heroically by insisting on his exacting descriptions – unprecedented in existing design histories, underappreciated by his publisher, yet carrying on regardless. 'The social cannot be estimated merely in terms of numbers produced or numbers of people who see and use it', writes Robin elsewhere. 'It's a question of human spirit and human culture … beyond and against the expectations of societies ordered by accounting economics and material and human waste.'[17]

To return to the view from Richard's window, those auspiciously departing and arriving BT vehicles mark a second shift – namely, in Richard's career at the turn of the 1990s. Like the majority of his generation of designers working in London from the 1950s onwards, he suddenly found himself facing a significant transition. The postwar design scene was initially populated by small inventive studios and individuals, who had such a regular supply of cultural, social and political work that they were able to casually pass work back and forth to each other. However, through the 1980s and 1990s, all three sectors began to assimilate the ways and means of big business, preoccupied with *quantification* – of user-friendliness, audience participation, attendance figures, and so forth.

As like attracts like, these newly corporatized cultural bodies, with their attendant departments devoted to developing and maintaining *public image*, now preferred to work with design companies of a similar stripe. That is, with equivalent ambition, stature, clout, and other facets of the corporate scheme (secretaries, fax machines, interminable meetings). The smaller-fish studios were swallowed by this new model (i.e. subjugation to market forces), and the work made under such conditions was inevitably more compromised.

Fortunately, Richard had enough of a reputation by this point to survive such a paradigm shift, but from this point on, his work became notably more polarized between what we might call the extremely marginalized (for charities, small galleries, and friends) and extremely protected (as a sort of designer-by-royal-appointment-to-Bridget Riley, for instance); certainly nothing that came close to the sense of long-term investment in cultural development that characterizes his work for Penguin, the BBC, Pluto Press, the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, or the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Robin summarizes in 'The New Tradition': 'When the [Whitechapel] Gallery was reopened in its upmarket guise in 1985, Hollis was replaced by a design group. The new graphic style, in tune with the building, went white and expensive.'[18]

By the end of the 1990s, the privatization and corporatization of mainstream culture was seemingly complete, and remains that way. At the same time, the increasingly rapid, extensive, fluid and inexpensive connectivity afforded by the nascent internet upended long-established economies of scale in publishing. This in turn led to the so-called 'long tail' of culture, the flipside of that corporate mainstream populated by myriad niche interests, countless instances of relatively small numbers of unusually devoted readers and viewers. This is where that so-called heroic spirit – that attention and dedication – that Richard lamented as having declined or disappeared since the heyday of modernism now surfaces: elsewhere, but by no means eradicated. Again I'll come back to this at the end.

The other week, Richard told me he'd found a note to himself from his time as a teacher that read along the lines of: *it's far more useful to talk about one work in depth than superficially cut across a large batch*. With this in mind, I want to look at three specific examples of his work. The first is *Ways of*

[17] Kinross, 'Let the Object *Speak*', op. cit., p. 33.

[18] Kinross, 'The New Tradition', op. cit., p. 38.

*Seeing*, the seminal book he made in 1972 as one of a team of five: its author, John Berger, an artist, Sven Blomberg, a TV producer, Mike Dibb and a 'critical friend' of Berger's, Chris Fox. In the event their roles were reportedly far less distinct, with plenty of room for manoeuvre and a lot of argument; the democratic spirit upheld, too, in Berger's insistence that the royalties from the first printing were split equally five ways.

In showing such a well-known and well-regarded book as *Ways of Seeing* here I mean emphasize that one of the qualities of his work I admire most is how *obvious* it is – and yet *counterintuitively obvious*, if that makes any sense. It's so straight that it's peculiar in a way makes more ostentatiously 'weird' work seem overly contrived. Robin once described Richard's work as inventive rather than innovative. There's no ego here; no new-for-the-sake-of-being-new.

Back to *Ways of Seeing*. The book was borne of a chance meeting in the mid-1960s with Berger, back then an artist, critic and novelist. Hollis was the art editor of *New Society*, a weekly journal of social and cultural commentary, and Berger was a regular contributor.

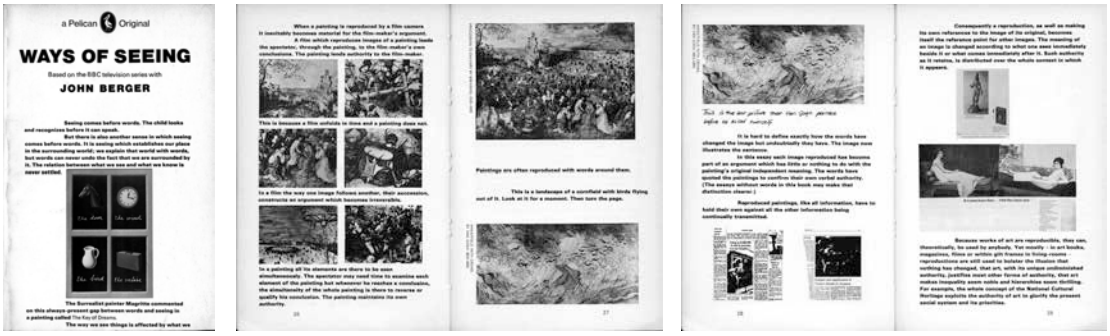



Hollis found himself arguing with Berger at a party, criticizing something he had recently said on TV for being 'exaggeratedly Marxist'. The ensuing debate led to Berger inviting Richard to help realize his fourth novel, *G.* Berger originally intended to illustrate this in the style of surrealist chief André Bréton's 1928 novel *Nadja*, which married text and images to form a composite portrait of a Parisian woman. In the end Berger's idea never really developed beyond the inclusion of two small illustrations, though there are notable experiments with spacing paragraphs relative to shifts in time, thought and meaning that clearly pre-empt the filmic devices of their later work together. Hollis remembers Berger fondly as being the rare sort of writer modest enough to happily to cut or extend his text to fit a paragraph or page – likely a hangover from his work as a journalist. Berger clearly appreciated the collaboration too, as he asked Hollis to work on the book to be tied in with his four-part BBC TV series. *Ways of Seeing* was an unprecedented approach to the public discussion of fine art, essentially an illustrated monologue that explored the idea of art as commodity and its relation to society – to pornography, to advertising, to children, and so on. It was also an explicitly new way of dealing with art on TV.

Rather than the book being primarily author-, editor- or designer-led, the book pushes for a third, uncharted way. Equivalent examples that come to mind are the close collaborations between Marshall McLuhan & Quentin Fiore (e.g. 1967's *The Medium is The Massage*), and more recently Rem Koolhaas & Bruce Mau (e.g. 1995's *S, M, L, XL*). The form and content of both books is similarly symbiotic. All exemplify of what I've come to think of as a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction aesthetic – in the sense that a willingness to draw form from content rather than apply a personal stylistic agenda makes for work that ends up more visually radical than a purely formalistic approach where radicality itself is the main aim.

Yes, the book is attractively odd. Yes, it offers a whole new way to think about book design in the same way the TV series departs from the usual ways of showing art on TV. But it's equally worth appreciating *Ways of Seeing* for its bloody-mindedness. It begins already on the cover, which immediately announces both its maverick character and its outspoken point of view. Berger's opening line: 'The child looks and recognizes before it can speak'. You *see* the idea of the

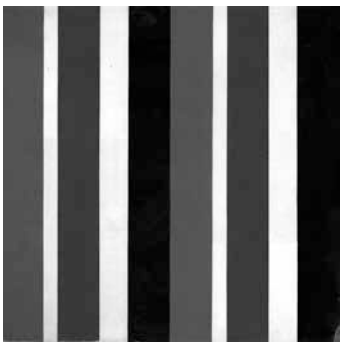
text starting on the cover before you *read* the words, just as you *see* Magritte's image before you *read* the explanation – an immediacy and authority that's reinforced by the unusually bold body type.




The bold type was intended to match the visual weight of the images, as well as Berger's strident TV voice. It is left-justified, unhyphenated, broken and manipulated in order to duplicate and reinforce meaning: pictures of work are inserted as and when they are mentioned in the text, their size determined by aligning the left edge on the large text indent and scaling according to what space remains on the page. Hollis and Berger reasoned that full picture captions would interrupt the flow of the argument, so most of the information is pushed to the back of the book while a simple name, title and date runs up the side of each image – a method also designed to discourage speed-reading the book by images alone. In the opening pages Berger writes: 'The form of the book is as much to do with our purpose as the arguments contained in it.' And so it duplicates the TV series in this sense as well – self-reflexively drawing attention to its own design in line with its founding principle: critical engagement with the work at hand.

A *Ways of Seeing* that didn't begin on the cover, or with images divorced from the text, or assembled into a different format, or set in different type, would be a very different thing (recent editions demonstrate this well enough). Not everyone liked it, though: apparently, the first time Penguin's head designer Hans Schmoller saw a copy of the first edition he threw it down the corridor in fury.

The next examples of Richard's work I want to look at are the catalogues and ephemera he produced for London's Whitechapel gallery. Spanning a total period of 15 years, this body of work shows the subtle shift from a relatively dogmatic approach to something far more flexible and easygoing. Early in his career, Richard was preoccupied with Concrete Art, in which the form of the work derives from a set of rules. Here's a typical painting he made at the time: the relative proportions of the stripes are based on units of three, and the pattern repeated after the central axis. He calls it a 'visual statement'.






The equivalent tendency in graphic design was most fully realized in Switzerland after the Second World War. Richard's second major history book from 2006 documents this movement, which was variously known – paradoxically – as both Swiss Modernism and the International Style, demonstrated and propagated by a number of accomplished practitioner-theorists such as Karl Gerstner, Josef Muller-Brockmann and Max Bill. One of the genre's defining features is the underlying grid structure. Relatively strict, complex templates are particularly useful when working with Swiss material because it is often multilingual and so requires setting in German, French and Italian. It makes obvious sense to

run the three languages in parallel to avoid repeating images, and this requires well-organized and clearly articulated pages.

Though it made less overt technical sense elsewhere, thanks to a few imported magazines and influential teachers, this clean, clinical Swiss look was commonplace in 1960s London. More than most of his colleagues, however, Richard adapted the grid to his own, idiosyncratic ends; the emphatically squared-up page became a means of combining words and pictures in unusually pronounced and articulate ways. One feature that's particularly evident in Richard's work for the Whitechapel gallery is his use of large text indents, often as a second axis on which to align images. As with the Tschichold poster, the underlying structure affords a clear graphic grammar – a means of carrying a reader through the material. Though Richard's prominent use of grids was by no means gratuitous, i.e. by no means merely stylistic, it's no contradiction to say it was also stylish; it became characteristic.







Even more formative than the Swiss influence is a folding broadsheet titled *I, Eye*. This is a record of a trip Richard made to Castro's Cuba. He (Richard, not Castro) was responsible for all aspects of the document – taking and developing the photographs, writing and editing the observations, then pasting both together in negative on a glass sheet lit from below by a lamp. A printing plate was made directly from this master; the title was added by hand at the end, along with an impression from a Cuban rubber stamp. What's particularly prescient here, is how the folds form a *physical* grid on which to hang the unfolding narrative – that is, a framework on which work out the relative order and freedom in the arrangement of material. In fact, the DNA for a lot of what came after is encapsulated in this modest piece of reportage, and it's plain to see how the same hands-on thinking informs and plays out in many different ways over the decade that Richard worked for the Whitechapel.

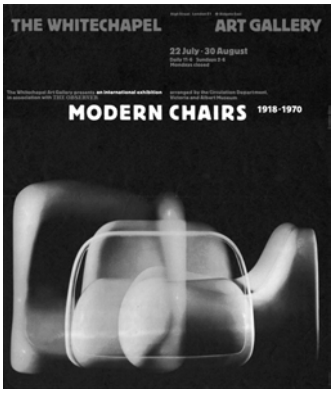
It's instructive to see how the same intelligence plays out in different circumstances. Many of the features that made *Ways of Seeing* so distinctive are carried over into the Whitechapel work (not least that large text indent again), but there are a few new demands and responses as well. Where *Ways of Seeing* is a linear argument sustained over 160 small-format pages, occasionally making inventive use of the page break, the Whitechapel's various invitations, leaflets, pamphlets and posters were designed to unfold from smaller discrete panels to larger composite ones, with various bits of information arranged according to this sequence. It puts the 'physical grid' of the Cuba document to work for the Whitechapel – an unusually tangible and active identity.












The folds became as much part of the identity as the typeface. This was a redrawn version of Block, a German font that dates from the same period as the Whitechapel building and happens to recall its distinctive architecture. Richard also made the most of a cheap two-colour palette, combining different percentages of halftone screens to make a range of secondary colours, and often overprinting them to make something like black. Such economy of means – how to achieve the most with the least – was a common modernist dictum, of course, though Richard thinks it was just as much a consequence of being brought up in the austerity of postwar Britain.

I already quoted Richard as saying, 'my own view of design is that it is inevitably part of the social servicing, and that is why bad or incoherent design is offensive.' In pointing to its clarity, invention and answerability, I want to claim his approach as a form of 'social work', too. Robin expanded on this idea:

> Multiplication of text is a social act that provides a forum for dialogue and exchange; deliberately making text hard to read is thus a public offence (... Consider) a page of words that say something of interest, [set in] an ordinary typeface, without pretensions (...) In its freedom and order, it is a model for social arrangements too.[19]

To wrap this up, I want to flag one final shift in Richard's career that again mirrors a shift in culture at large – this time in the period since he began to wind down his work rate. Consider the recent proliferation of those who started out as (for want of a far better term) 'straight' graphic designers branching out into other roles in the broader ecology of communication. Over the last ten years or so there have been countless instances of people working not only at the coalface of graphic design, but doing the commissioning or producing or selling things themselves. I'm referring to people trained or otherwise versed in graphic design starting up publishing imprints, galleries, summer schools, event spaces, journals, magazines and shops; myself included.

I think this is a logical enough extension of the reason many people get into the field in the first place, i.e. to share information and articulate it accordingly; and I think it's a logical enough response to the general scarcity of engaging work and conducive working relationships (for all the reasons related to the corporatization of culture I outlined earlier). I mention it mainly to say that I don't think the commitment to hard thinking and constructive communication that Richard lamented as having all but disappeared since Tschichold and his heroic modernist ilk has disappeared per se; rather, it's been *displaced*. In the face of what seem to be apparently diminishing if not yet extinct opportunities to work in more obviously social areas, whether designing public transport signage, or government forms, or culturally-oriented publishing imprints beyond the grip of the marketing mentality (and here I mean the digital versions of these things too), this cultural diaspora have begun preoccupying themselves by manufacturing culture rather than graphic-designing it. Or actually, to manufacture it in order to *then* graphic design it too. They make their own work. Hence the general turn to *publishing in its most*

[19] Kinross, 'Let the Object *Speak*', op. cit., p. 33.

*exploded sense,* which is only to say a return to its original etymological sense: *making things generally known*.

And while on one hand this could be seen as entirely positive, on the other it's difficult to see how it can be sustained without the support of state subsidies or private beneficiaries in one more or less clandestine form or another. It's equally difficult not to feel that this is going to dry up at some point soon once various cultural policy plugs are pulled, as happened in a shockingly short space of time in The Netherlands a couple of years ago.

It's hard to ignore the feeling, too, that the situation produces simply too much stuff made with too much love. That might sound ridiculous, but I can't be alone in walking around events like Printed Matter's book fair at PS1 here in New York last weekend with the pressing feeling that the amount of printed matter being lovingly produced with often astounding dedication and no less astoundingly refined graphic design seems out of all proportion to its imagined readership; and that there's no way more than say 5% of this avalanche of printed matter can possibly *matter*, or at the very least be adequately digested relative to the amount of work put it. In short, the system is out of whack, and I'd anticipate an impending survival of the fittest on the horizon. Something has to give.

Okay, I'm generalizing wildly now, and possibly delusional, but I like to imagine that exhibitions such as the one upstairs, showing work produced under such distinctly *other*, largely lapsed conditions might excite *actual* commissions that emerge from the kind of social spirit that originally generated much of it in the first place – from outside as well as inside the arts. Even Richard has spent the last few years publishing – and editing and designing – a few books by friends and colleagues under his own imprint. And in this sense I'd say he remains entirely in tune with the current generation of those who still pass for graphic designers on the basis of his own definition. That's to say, those who are in it for culture rather than capital, and conceive of graphic design as something more than mere marketing, something made instead with what I like to think of as a telling intelligence.

## 9.4: THE MORNING AFTER

Another way those fugitive designers 'in it for culture rather than capital' have resisted corporate takeover is by seeking refuge under the relatively welcoming umbrella of contemporary art, operating under the diverse auspices of the ever-mounting numbers of museums, galleries, independent spaces, biennials and so on. Art's borders have become expansive and permeable enough in recent decades to accommodate neighbouring interests; and inasmuch as contemporary art remains at least principally for art's sake (meaning without a commercial mandate – at least relative to graphic design[20]), it's an obvious enough place for a more searching, *philosophical* kind of publishing to take root, tap some institutional cash, and seek new audiences. (That 'philosophical' is here meant firmly in the soft sense, i.e. thoughtful, contemplative, reflective; perhaps also stoical, and in a certain sense resigned.)

What I want to argue is that this tendency stretches beyond simply 'appropriating the broader roles of publishing' in order to forge a new type of work altogether. It's become somewhat commonplace to assume designers are out to 'become artists' in some sense, but that's not how I see it. What *is* true is that the strain of work I have in mind takes place in spaces that were formerly the exclusive domain of artists. There's a difference.

What follows is a discussion between David (D) and myself (S) that we recorded and edited into a contribution for a group exhibition, *Pre-Specifics*, at Onomatapee, Eindhoven, in 2010.[21] The idea was to respond to that pamphlet by Dutch design think tank Metahaven called *White Night Before a*

[20] … regardless of whether the institutions are funded by the state, by commercial activities, or by private donors, which is a whole other matter; and without sidetracking into the whole tedious issue of the art market as a driving force.

[21] *Pre-Specifics: Access X!*, Onomatopee, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, 23–31 October, 2010.

*Manifesto*, which had been published by the same institution a couple of years before.[22] We were both at once taken with and troubled by this document, a polemic about the confused and confusing situation of working in graphic design during the shift from material depth to immaterial surface in the age of web 2.0. What particularly disturbed us was the airlessness of the account: the contemporary designer seems condemned without respite to imbue an endless supply of virtual 'surface' with nebulous 'value'.

But this is usefully complicated by the fact that Metahaven operate outside their own grim description – not least in this very pamphlet. In other words, the way they go about making their argument seems inconsistent with what they argue – and so it seemed useful to try to unravel the contradictions.
We also meant to take the exhibition's title at face value by making something literally 'pre-specific', i.e. gather some loose thoughts in advance of a more resolved response, specifically a sequel pamphlet with the working title *The Morning After* (which in the end never happened).

This is a transcription of the recording, which emanated from the bottom of a black box in the exhibition. Our voices played over the sound of bubbling water as though we were speaking sat at the bottom of the ocean. This may have been a reference to the loss of 'depth' lamented in the discussion, but it probably had just as much to do with our colleague Jan Verwoert's enthusiasm for the philosophy of underwater cartoon character Spongebob Squarepants.

(Bubbling)

S: So the idea is to pinpoint why we're so bothered by Metahaven's *White Night Before a Manifesto*. For starters, I'd say that our discomfort is less in response to their actual overview, which is full of concise insight, and more to do with how the extremely bleak condition they describe comes across as a foregone conclusion. That said, given that the last part of the pamphlet dwells on the history and nature of the art/design manifesto, it's plausible that their dead-end view is deliberately exaggerated – and ought to be taken as a provocation. In which case, it's simply difficult to work out to what extent they believe the situation to be as alienating as they make out. Admittedly, I prefer my analysis less coldly diagnostic and more warmly progressive, but it seems fair enough to say that what they've described feels like only half the story. In talking it through, maybe we can arrive at a clearer, more expansive view – and hopefully find some ways of moving forward in this foggy territory between art and design.

D: Fair enough. Go on.

S: Well, the more I consider the pamphlet, the more I appreciate a whole host of more subtle qualities beyond what the text actually says – what we might call 'extra-textual' aspects that get overwhelmed by the polemics. That title is already quite loaded, for instance. Calling something a manifesto these days is hopelessly anachronistic, but to write *before* a manifesto is to slip the idea into a reader's mind without short-circuiting their reading – winking at the idea without actually carrying it out. Now that's inspired. There's some humour in it, too.

Then they go on to state that the sole sorry task of the contemporary designer is to imbue the world's endlessly proliferating virtual surfaces with some nebulous sense of value. And yet they themselves clearly operate outside this limited position. The pamphlet itself is a case in point: not some market-driven manipulation of surface, but a seriously considered slice of cultural criticism. In thinking all this stuff through – articulating it, publishing it, contributing to a discussion or otherwise starting one – they're doing something quite the opposite of 'surface'. Again, the problem is that this basic fact is easily overlooked. And if only a handful of readers get the work's subtler, more *constructive* qualities,

[22] Metahaven, *White Night Before a Manifesto*, op. cit. For a fuller description see §8.6.

then Metahaven are surely forfeiting the 'repoliticization' of design – the greater social reach and effect – they've claimed elsewhere to be out to achieve, and that I think is well worth aiming for.[23]

D: Yes, I think everything about how the pamphlet is designed, including the language and the way it's been published, amounts to an invitation to respond. It's a call for collective action. However, I don't find the actual argument about surface and value as convincing as the way it's all been put together. I don't think it corresponds with the reality of the situation; it's all a bit too glib and certainly defeatist. The part I find most difficult to swallow is the distinction between surface and whatever else is supposed to be lying beneath it – some sort of 'hard ground'. Let's see what they say exactly … that surface is 'disconnected from the non-negotiability of the brutal material ground, historical structure and political struggles on which, originally, surface itself was premised.'[24]

They talk about this more concretely in terms of how the today's designers fill out already-existing templates, which suggests that this has replaced a formerly 'deeper' way of designing 'from the ground up'. Now, I think their account of how surface multiplies is right-on – it's a productive thought. Unlike geographical territory, they say, there's no limit to the proliferation of virtual worlds. This follows what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt write in *Empire* about the breaking down of nation states and sovereignty: borders become permeable and begin to be articulated in different ways, at all levels.[25] Formerly distinct lines between the production and consumption of software, for instance, are far more permeable than before. One person's consumption becomes someone else's production. Facebook is an obvious example: as soon as you participate in that community, 'consuming' relationships with other people, you're automatically working, 'producing', for the corporation. So I think these ideas about proliferating surface and porous borders are very accurate descriptions of the way the world is working right now.

S: Is that porousness so new? Consider that, say, a hundred years ago the production of goods was a one-way process: a company makes a product based on a perceived need or desire. Soon, with the advent of market research, focus groups and so on, a feedback loop develops and manufacturing becomes more of a *two-way* process: those products are still created on the basis of those projected needs or desires – only those desires are increasingly *created* by the availability of products in the first place. The net effect being that consumers increasingly influence what's produced. The situation becomes increasingly reflexive, the feedback loop ever tighter, and the result an increasingly anodyne, predigested and predictable culture. This is precisely the condition implied by *White Night*. Surely anyone with a serious investment in culture would want to work against it.

D: That's why the tone of the pamphlet is difficult for me to swallow – because it accepts that position rather than offering or imagining an alternative to it.

S: Well, again, I think it *does* suggest an alternative, but by example rather than argument, by doing rather than describing. The problem is that this embodiment is too obscure. Metahaven call what they do 'speculative design' or 'research'. Whatever it's called, it's a distinctly ambiguous kind of work, and the places it plays out are usually ambiguous too. Where does this work live? What is it? Art? Design? Sociology? Political science? All of them, in a way – but that hardly helps focus anyone's reading of it. All of which suggests that this kind of work requires a very careful *setup* – more attention paid to its positioning, its captioning.

D: Yes, that alternative, that redemptive possibility is never explicitly mentioned in *White Night*, whereas in *Empire*, for instance, it's part of the argument. About three-quarters of the way through

[23] 'One of the main challenges is how to build a new "we", a new collective beyond stylistic differences. The lack of a functional purpose existing in design today should not lead to cynicism, but to research and investigation; it may allow us to become political again.' Daniel van der Velden quoted in: Magnus Ericson, 'Interview with Metahaven on Design and Research', *Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice: The Reader* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), p. 261. See also 'Designers and the political: an interview with Daniel van der Velden', *Idea*, no. 320, 2007.

[24] Metahaven, eds., *White Night Before a Manifesto*, op. cit. (unpaginated).

[25] Negri and Hardt, op. cit.

*Empire* there's a fuller description of immaterial labour practices, where those borders between production and consumption are completely broken down. Negri and Hardt say that the fact that these activities occur in one common virtual space affords the possibility of using the fluid connections to resist the very system people are working inside. The situation contains the seeds for unravelling the situation. That's why the book has a reputation for being a new communist manifesto: it's a call for common resistance to the totalizing aspect of that blurring production-consumption loop.

S: Does that mean the margins are the only place where that resistance can happen?

D: Well, the idea is that where there used to be countless discrete 'marginal' communities with no possibility of gathering enough momentum to react against the mainstream, the connectivity afforded by the internet – the ultimate porous border – means those groups are now able to assemble into an effective force without ever losing their essential status as discrete phenomena. I think it's more useful to think about the 'surface' Metahaven describe as being one such common area.

S: This is the case Jacques Rancière makes in 'The Surface of Design'.[26]

D: Yes, and to be fair Metahaven do allude to the idea too, they just don't spell it out.

S: Which is why it's useful to offer some kind of commentary alongside the piece itself – the way you might momentarily step outside the flow of a prepared talk to elaborate something you intuit isn't coming across to a particular audience. When I've read *White Night* with students, I've backed it up with bits of Metahaven's interviews and essays, and I always hope that this broader view draws more attention to the kind of agency that their sort of reflection ideally affords. But the ideal would of course be to produce the kind of work that doesn't need this kind of compensatory annotation, where there's no gap between saying and doing.

D: We were just describing a time when consumption was more distinct from production, when that market research feedback loop wasn't so advanced. But when the only things that get made are the things that people *ask* to be made, there's no longer any space for speculative products. I mean speculative in the sense that art is speculative: art puts ideas out in the world, and possibly people gather around those ideas to contemplate their implications. I'm all for a kind of design that does the same sort of thing – and in fact I think this was more the case back in the time before those focus groups became so dominant.

In 'The Surface of Design', Ranciere suggests there's a commonality in the work of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the German industrial designer Peter Behrens. Both, he says, are particularly interested in *types* – that is, essential, *typical forms*. In Mallarmé's case, the layout of a poem was potentially as expressive as the words; he worked *at the level of structure*, consciously *referencing* typical poetic forms. Around the same time, Behrens was working to standardize the product line of AEG, the German electrical company, by designing typical functional forms across the board, from light bulb to graphic identity.

S: Reading Rancière on Behrens makes clearer to me what Metahaven mean when they write about the present-day 'impotence' of corporate identity.[27] I could never really imagine what a contrary *potent* identity might mean back in, say, the 1920s or the 1960s. Now I can appreciate there was more space to fold some ideological aspect into the work – like this progressive idea of 'type forms'.

D: Yes, and I think that *this* kind of speculative design, the sort of work that claims the agency to propose that certain forms are correct, or most expedient … well, I think that's very powerful and I hate to see it given up so easily. I want to read *White Night* as a call to reactivate that kind of conviction in the same way that *Empire* pushes for a marginal-but-collective way of working. 'Designing' didn't

[26] Rancière, 'The Surface of Design', op. cit.

[27] See for instance: Metahaven, eds. *Uncorporate identity*, op. cit.

always mean giving form to someone else's idea. It originally meant casting new ideas – in the shape of *things* – out into the world. It was closer to 'inventing'.

S: It seems to me that Metahaven have always been too preoccupied with a sense of design that derives from the adjectival use of 'designer' – the fashion- or gimmick- or label-based 'designer culture' that's implied by white designer walls or black designer clothes, shorthand for a very 1990s type of elitism. But that's only one of many inflections. Another problem with the pamphlet, I think, is that the term 'design' is used indiscriminately – sometimes generally and sometimes specifically, without qualification. And in the confusion, I think that older but just as valid meaning of 'design' you're talking about to gets lost. In *White Night*, the word 'design' certainly means something more akin to fashion than planning or invention.

D: Clearly Metahaven have used design as a particularly active agent in articulating their ideas – in terms of the language, its graphic design, its complementary physical and virtual formats, and the ways they're respectively distributed. And you're completely correct in saying that it would be very easy for a wider audience to miss the design cues. One simple 'corrective' would be to take the pamphlet and annotate it in order to attach it to a broader field of thinking. Small cues can have great effects if those cues are highlighted by some other context. This is how painting works, for example.

S: You mean in an art historical context?

D: Yes. When you throw an artwork out into the world, you have some idea where it's pointing. Modest gestures become meaningful once they're understood within some range of … well, other people's work, essentially. Graphic design doesn't have the same kind of 'preparatory' context, the same frame of reference, so you can't assume subtle codes and gestures will be magnified in the same way. Again it follows, then, that the stuff made in this grey area between art and design needs to work extra hard in terms of framing itself in order to ensure that it's read as intended.

S: Interesting work can happen here precisely because of the lack of precedent. Personally I think the strongest work performs a gesture *and* does the job of contextualizing that gesture.

D: To switch topic a bit, I don't completely follow Metahaven when they say that contemporary surface is inhabited by 'defaults'. At first they say surface requires ceaseless seductive innovation in order to proliferate and supplant physical territories; later they say it's characterized by 'default' forms (such as the cellphone that looks like a piece of jewellery). More intriguing is their coining the term 'the hollows' to mean a kind of zero-level surface – 'the naked infrastructure or root level system language which precedes surface itself, surface without its effects.'[28] Perhaps a skeleton is a more pertinent image.

The skeleton is a useful metaphor because (to mix metaphors for a second) it conjures both the recipe and the cake. Naturally, the skeleton is *essential*, the base of the body. More interestingly, though, it's full of cues that insinuate how the body works. The more you look at a skeleton, the more its structure suggests that it contains channels (nerves, vains), that it encases things (organs), that it's padded (with muscle) and covered (with tissue and skin). What's apparent helps you perceive things that aren't apparent. The skeleton helps you *get it*.

The other night a friend and I agreed that if we were able to go back and study a different subject it would be biology, because understanding the way other animals work gives you an enormous amount of insight. It's a specific, generous and fundamentally *generative* kind of knowledge. It's not about accumulating facts. Once you understand how, say, a cat's anatomy works, you understand the world in a richer, more complex way. The use value of that little bit of knowledge is multiplied a hundred-fold. Okay, this isn't exclusive to biology – philosophical ideas work this way too, for instance. The point is, until you make the provocative, speculative gesture of putting the skeleton out there in the world, there's no way to comprehend those essential mechanisms.

[28] Metahaven, eds., *White Night Before a Manifesto*, op. cit. (unpaginated). See §8.3 and §8.6 for more on 'the hollows'.

S: Krysztof Kieślowski, the Polish film director, once remarked that you need to describe something in order to start speculating about it. If something hasn't been described, there's nothing to refer to.

D: Yes. Again, you offer up that essential type form; and again, I think the gesture is native to design. I suppose biology seems particularly instructive because it's not concerned with man-made artefacts, which are always of course artificial, but about *life* – about things that change over time and that grow. If you want to understand something about life, the best thing to do is study life!

S: You could also say: if you want to study the nature of things – the essentials, the root mechanisms – the best thing to do is study nature. Moreover, *change* is fundamental to the study of biological processes. Where it's not necessarily so prominent in other fields, it's the very basis of biology.

D: Exactly.

S: The other day I was speaking with Dave Bailey about his contribution to this same *Pre-Specifics* show. He was busy organizing a bunch of research materials on his studio wall while simultaneously trying to assemble the same thing on a computer in order that it could travel more efficiently to exhibition. He noted how difficult it was to switch back and forth between physical and digital versions, and gradually realized the messy bit of wall was far closer *in nature* to his actual thinking on the subject. When he fed the same stuff into the computer, he was already forced into working with the software's defaults, and that automatically meant a more linear, less fragmentary, more *sensible* arrangement than it actually was. The computer was *foreclosing* thought where the wall allowed it to proliferate. In conclusion, the wall version was the more appropriately 'pre-specific' arrangement – and so that's what he's ending up sending.

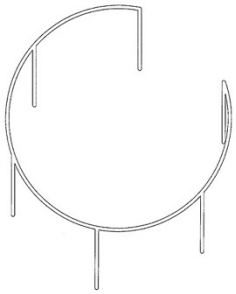
D: Yes – it's apparently common knowledge in academia that the best mathematicians make sure to work on as large a sheet of blank paper as possible.

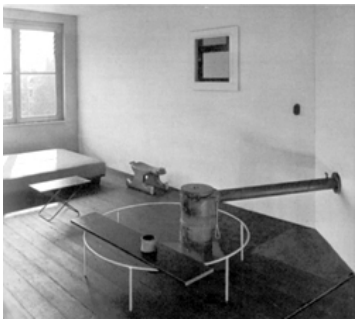
S: The problem, he realized, is always how to combine the best of both worlds: the analogue as a more accurate reflection of the way his thinking actually works, the digital to enable that thinking to travel.

D: *White Night* contains a lot of chronological cues that indicate it was written at a certain moment. For example, they make a point of noting the software they used to write the piece, Neo-Office. I'm obviously supposed to notice this and wonder why they did that. What does the use of 'Neo-Office' in 2008 imply in terms of, say, the degree to which digital technologies still mimic their analogue predecessors? The same sorts of questions are raised by the extreme use of drop shadows and other graphic effects.

S: Yes, and in that sense it's very much a piece of Graphic Design in capital letters. It says 'look at me – I'm clearly made this way for a reason', even though that reason might be obscure. As well as the ostentatiously printed pamphlet, *White Night* equally exists in the form of a very plainly typeset, freely downloadable PDF that's about as opposite as possible, formally speaking. And so at the level of format and distribution, too, they draw attention to the gap between the highly mediated surface of the printed copy and this relatively unmediated, digital 'hollows' version. The text notes that the PDF is susceptible to alteration, amendment, refinement, and as such queries the tentative status of the manifesto form in such an open environment: what happens to timely, declarative statements in an age when they can be so easily overwritten? In other words, they contrast the old-model print version with the new-model PDF version in order to draw out the implications of the differences between the two. To me, *that*'s the proper potential of speculative designing, that asserts some agency in the same spirit as Behrens at AEG. And again, that may well get missed.

D: These speculative, provocative products we've been alluding to – the sorts of stuff Behrens made for instance – tend not only to carry traces of how they came together, but also cues that anticipate how they might be put to use in the future. A good example closer to home is the steel ring that sat in the middle of our basement floor last year. Coming across that mysterious ring for the first time, you're bound to wonder why it ended up there, what it's all *about*. It doesn't seem to have a use but it *looks* functional. Significantly, perhaps, it's also a notably skeletal form.





S: It seems to have a ‘deeper’ purpose.

D: Yes – it’s not just an annoying obstruction. *We* know already, of course, that the ring was originally intended to guard against walking into a freestanding oven in the middle of the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck’s apartment.[29] But its form is open enough to suggest a bunch of further uses in the future, none of which are very determined. That's what's beautiful about it – its unresolved potential, as well as its accessibility. You *want* to understand.

In any case, I think it’s a pretty good idea to take *White Night* and make what would essentially serve as a guide to reading it. Inasmuch as time is explicitly embedded in the original document, it calls out for a future response that might simultaneously complicate what it’s saying *and* make it more accessible – to draw out what’s written between the lines. I think we’ve touched on the major points to write about. We reject the idea that there’s a distinction between surface and whatever else underneath. The goal is to find an apt form to articulate complex ‘matters of concern’. And our mascot is the skeleton.

S: I have in mind Albrecht Dürer’s *Death and the Landsknecht*, which depicts a skeleton holding an hourglass in front of a clothed man. Inscribed into the surface of the woodcut – *all on a level* – are the date, 1510, Dürer’s monogram, and an ominous loose bone on the floor. That seems emblematic of what we’re after.




[29] See: *Common Circular 2: Common Room Presents Dexter Sinister Presents Common Room,* June 2009, http://common-room.net/common-circular-2.

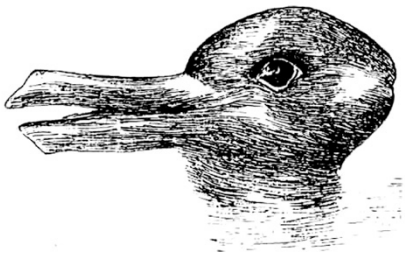
## 9.5: ANATOMY OF A DUCKRABBIT

Writing from within 'the situation of postmodernism' back in 1979, art critic Rosalind Krauss stated that what might seem to be merely eclectic from one point of view can be seen as 'rigorously logical' from another. Practice is no longer defined in relation to a given medium, she continues, but 'in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium – photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself – might be used.'[30]

More recently, art theorist Boris Groys pointed out that while in the modernist era the 'art context' was regarded as stable, in our time it is regarded as the opposite – changing and *unstable*. Working in the realm of art today therefore involves creating new contexts: where art used to operate exclusively on the level of form, the most potent art today necessarily operates *a level out*, working with 'contexts, frameworks, backgrounds, and new theoretical interpretations'.[31]

And more recently still, in 2008, artist Paul Chan described his work as neither 'critique' nor 'cultic object', but rather an 'art of affirmation'. 'Now I don't know what that means' says Chan, 'But that sounds right to me … [T]here are no formulas for this.'[32]

Let's consider the anatomy of our hybrid art/design enterprise in light of these three observations.



Philosophical interest in the classic reciprocal duckrabbit image can be summarized as follows. First you perceive one animal, then the other, but your perception of the second is affected by having seen the first, then, looking back at the first again, your perception is further affected by having seen both.

In order to get a handle on what's being merged, let's begin back at a baseline distinction between art and design. To synthesize a number of related observations elsewhere in this thesis, the general terms that seem most accurate to me are as follows. Designers typically and essentially work from *others' interests* (subject matter) supplied or imposed from the 'outside'. Artists typically and essentially work from *personal interests* (subject matter) drawn or assembled from the 'inside'. (Both can be directed towards more or less commercial ends; this is beside the point.)

From this typical, essential difference, designers and artists *alike* work to articulate those relatively exterior or interior interests, usually in view of *making things public* – that's to say, sharing them on collective, worldly, appreciable terms.

(This is not a question of fixing a job description, only of getting at what's particular about the kind of work I've been writing about, where and how it plays out, and how it might be constructively carried out by ourselves or anyone else in the future.)

The contrary constitution of a reversible *duckrabbit* species of work is as follows:

[30] Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, vol. 8, Spring 1979, p. 42.

[31] See: Boris Groys, 'On the New', 2002, http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/espai/eng/art/groys1002/groys1002.html#bibliografia.

[32] George Baker, 'An interview with Paul Chan', *October*, no. 123, Winter 2008, p. 209.

– Our work's raw material is not imposed, arbitrary or alien, but corresponds with our own interests. However, those interests are usually rooted in the mechanisms of our founding field, graphic design. The work is inherently self-reflexive because it is *about* writing, editing, designing and publishing, while explored *through* writing, editing, designing and publishing – hence its typically parallax aspect One consequence of this is that it tends to be more 'technical' than 'emotional'.[33] In any case, to the extent that it deals with *self-imposed* if *work-related* subject matter, we can admit the duckrabbit is akin to art (-as-traditionally-conceived) in that it *pursues its own interests*.

– *Then again*, the opportunities to perpetuate these interests are always rooted in some kind of realworld application – or at least an invitation that comes tethered to a particular context and a set of conditions. In which case our duckrabbit faces outward (at the worldly context) as much as inward (at its own workings). Such function gives the work gravitas: ideas are pushed out of the abstract and into the concrete. It is forced to demonstrate as well as channel them, which means there's a distinct measure of success or failure. The work puts itself on the line, so to speak. In any case, to the extent that it is made in view of practical – if often eccentric – application, we can admit the duckrabbit is akin to design (-as-traditionally-conceived) in that it *responds to vested interests*.

– *Moreover*, a stereotypical artistic disposition is reaching, searching, speculative; it seeks unlikely juxtapositions and connections; it is constitutionally averse to orthodox means of going about things because they just don't seem *catalytic* enough; hence the relentless 'blind' push for new forms. The counterpart designer disposition, meanwhile, concerns itself with how clearly things come across – how they are carried and framed, measured relative to conventions; and it seeks confirmation that it has achieved its aims. And the healthiest instances of our hybrid combine the best of both.

In *The Medium of Contingency*, Reza Negerastani offers a metaphor for this two-fold temperament in the image of a tuning fork – a stem and two prongs.[34] One prong is a *razor*, he says, while the other represents *reason*. The razor is 'a romantic and blind tool' that 'cuts for the sake of being extreme'; reason contemplates and makes sense of the cut; and together they resonate and 'tune the field of speculation'. He stops short, however, at pointing out that the fork needs to hit something in order to be useful. This substrate is the work, the project.

This work bears certain characteristics of other mediums. Like a certain kind of painting, time is often patently written (and re-written) into its surface. Like a certain sense of sculpture, it tends to be protracted, incremental, and manifests those slow changes slowly. Like certain lines of conceptual art, its base material tends to be text, it is constitutionally self-referential, and the 'setup' or 'conditions' are often emphasized in line with Sol LeWitt's formula that the idea is 'the machine that makes the art'.

Each of the Dexter Sinister projects recounted in this thesis amounts to a speculative investigation of the techniques, tools and mediums native to graphic design, whether Public Relations, press releases, Information Theory, Cybernetics (*True Mirror*), letterpress printing (*Black Whisky*), newspapers, WYSIWYM typesetting, paste-up (*The First/Last Newspaper*), computer programs, typefaces (*MTDBT2F*), graphic identities or marketing (*'Identity'*). All are elaborated, caricatured, blown out of proportion to allusive, philosophical purpose. As such, they can be held up in view of other domains. Connections are drawn and elaborated, channelling and registering timely social and technological issues that in turn invoke ethical and political ramifications. (When the work *works*, of course.)

John Kelsey sums this up when he writes that the contemporary artist 'doesn't just produce and present objects and images [any more, but] production itself … images and ideas of these that are at the same time (like it or not) ethical propositions.' And more than anything else, he continues, 'he makes momentum … in frozen glimpses … built on speed and work.'[35]

[33] (Though it's often more romantic than scientific.)

[34] Mackay, ed., op. cit., p. 58.

[35] John Kelsey, 'Decapitalisation', *Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 68 (my italics).

So for example, when the work informs an audience about an exhibition; when it advertises, validates and labels a product; when it circulates as a twice-weekly broadsheet; when it's used to typeset books, journals, signage systems and institutional identities; when it documents a certain historical trend. All aim to foster a kind of offset or ambient understanding – that with any luck turns into insight.

Specifically: The multiple iterations of *True Mirror* reflect what happens when information is dispersed through ambiguous channels, how it proliferates and alters according to the medium and the context. Making a *Black Whisky* is conceived as an excuse to explore cooperative production, the nature of surplus and waste, the parallels and dissonances between publishing and distilling, and the value of slowness in an expeditious milieu. *The First/Last Newspaper* obliquely reports 'live' on the current state of 'news' – who writes it, edits it, circulates it, and how, and to what ends. The various dimensions of *Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font* consider 'the letter versus the spirit of the law' in more everyday terms of chauvinism versus open-mindedness. And *'Identity'* wonders how the preoccupation with how stuff 'comes across' – often in marked contrast to the reality of things – came to dominate all aspects of contemporary life.

To recap the trajectory of my thesis:

First, I'm after a temperamentally self-reflexive way of working; one that's self-aware and self-critical enough to avoid lapsing into easy self-reflexive tropes. This frequently makes for work that bears the trace of its production, the 'structure' as evident as the 'substance' to the extent that they're one and the same. It involves setting up conditions to allow a project to 'play out' in practice, supple enough to usefully register contingencies met along the way. Ideally such an approach yields articulate objects – 'self-captioning' works that 'speak for themselves' without recourse to the supplements. All of which amounts to an essentially humanist ethos, generous and relation seeking. It sounds something like an aesthetic denomination of the 'new species of thinker' called for by the speculative realist philosopher Graham Harman: 'half-philosopher and half-engineer', in which philosophy is conceived as 'reverse engineering' and an 'infra-physics'.[36]

Back in chapter 1, I noted how Eco argued that the most authentic works of art of any era are those that push the development of forms, not for the sake of novelty, but in view of making truly affective work. Work, that is, with the real ambition and ability to agitate thought and action (permanently unsettled and unsettling) as opposed to that which merely repeats or refines existing stereotypes (maintaining the status quo). This is the sense, Eco also argued, in which it can be thought of as 'socially committed': as a tool for thinking, for *psychic survival*.

Here I've attempted to make the case for a way of working that continues this legacy. On first glance, this would seem to be neatly compressed into the old platitude 'it's not what you do but the way that you do it'. That's true enough, only ideally the way that it's done *determines* and so *infects* and so *marks* the work; in which case, it *is* what you do, too, so long as it manifests the way of working – and so long, too, as (to quote Moholy-Nagy) 'Man, not the product, is the end in view.'

This credo underpins the emphatically 'exploded' approach to publishing described here, characterised by the push and pull of two forces: from one side, the ambition to communicate as directly as possible, i.e. in accordance with the shared *conventions* of verbal and graphic language; from the other, the drive to push untapped *possibilities* of those languages in view of exciting and engaging an audience. This makes for an irregular, dynamic form of publishing that offers itself up as a model in the sense of working itself out in public, willing to flaunt as much failure as success.

This performative publishing could be thought in terms of a return to the values that underpin a socially-oriented approach to design. Such time travel is hardly possible, especially since formerly effective ways and means of working in the civic sphere have been so severely disabled since the point we'd ideally return *to*. Hence the same energies are spent through the far less practical, direct and quantifiable, more speculative, intellectual and delayed contexts of contemporary art. And how this

[36] Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (London: Zero, 2010), p. 91.

work is presented, visualized – how it all *comes across* – is precisely where art and graphic design can usefully overlap in the form of an artful graphic design and an earnestly-communicative art. Such practice is characterized what the theorist Stephen Wright has very recently called a 'double ontology' … that's 'both what it is, and a proposition of what it is' … on a '1:1 scale'.[37]

Recall, too, Eco's claim that by forging new forms rather than passively employing conventions, avant-garde art in the most constructive sense automatically registers the era's most pressing issues, and so gives us the means of apprehending those issues in advance of dealing with them. This kind of publishing works in view of the same ideal, in the sense that it speaks in tongues its editors don't quite understand yet, and in so doing so reflects the milieu's breaking news.

Where Eco's Open Works were equal to the mid-20th century indeterminacy and chaos, today's millennial equivalents record the sound of speed, exhaustion, obscurantism – *the corporatized society, the post-natural environment, the pharmacologically-altered human landscape* – and the daunting 'radical contingency' described in chapter 5.[38] The dominant character of the contemporary condition is perhaps best summed up as: unhinged.

Back before I began this thesis, I was drawn to Eco's chapter title 'Form as Social Commitment', as it seemed to promise to account for the elusive social aspect (i.e. aimed at improving our collective condition) that I always felt somehow drove what we were up to with such as *Dot Dot Dot* and Dexter Sinister, but which always came across as spurious, deluded or self-righteous in explanation (i.e. more or less the polar opposite). By the end of the chapter it was clear that what Eco meant by 'social commitment' was very general, grand, historical and heroic – namely, the dialectical progression of forms in order to ensure that society has adequate, commensurate means of perceiving events that befall it.

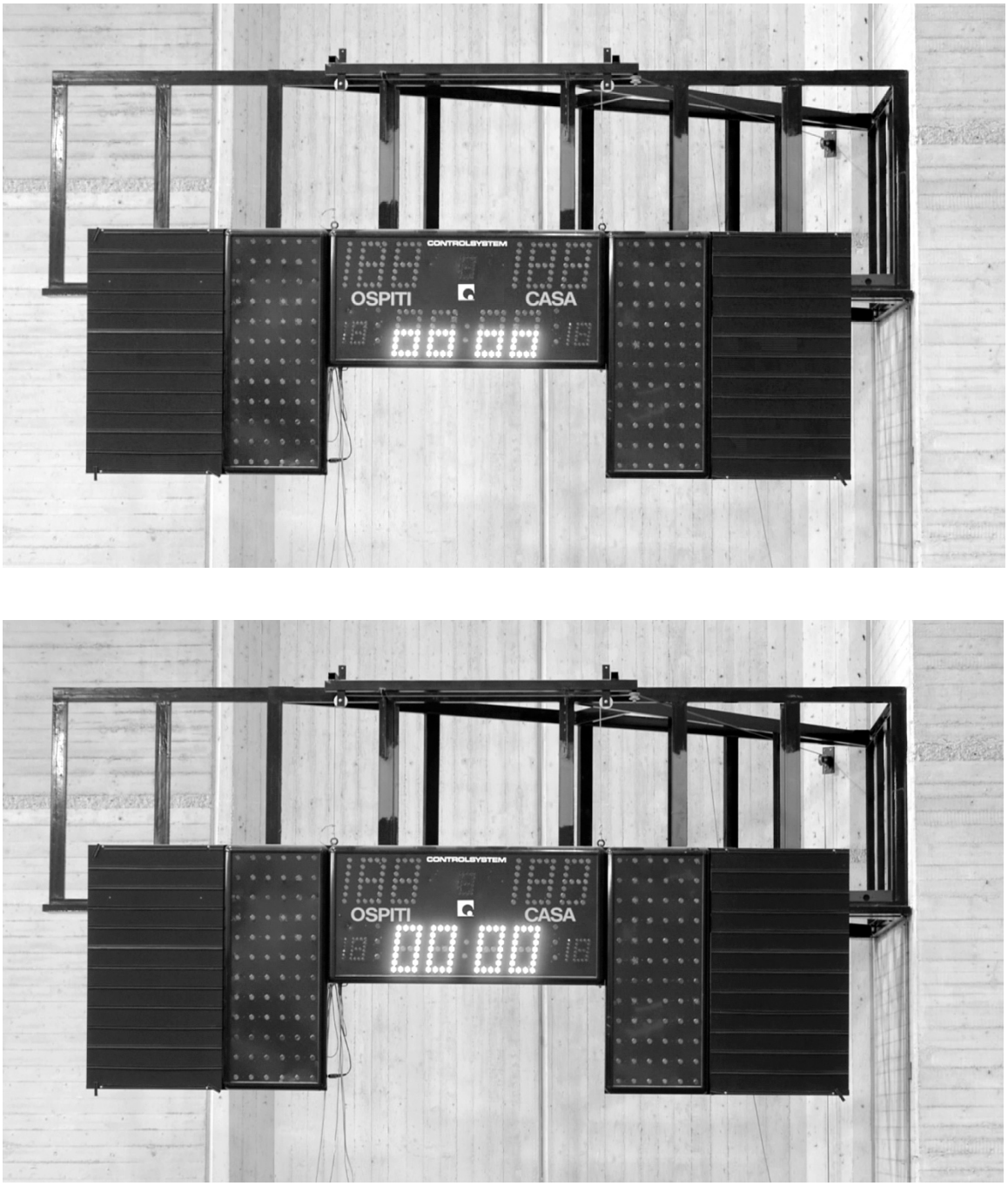
What I've come to realize in these pages is a far more mundane, quotidian, but perhaps also more (?) efficacious sense of that 'social commitment'. Namely, that *how* you work rubs off *on* the work. But the real realization is that both Eco's lofty sense and this grounded one essentially amount to the same thing; they are macro and micro versions of the same sensibility, or, as Norman Potter would have it, 'universals' and 'particulars'. Both are essentially humanist – abiding the original, least pretentious, sense of the word, naturally.

The trickiest aspect of all this self-analysis is to ensure that these intentions are plausibly aimed at society-at-large rather than self-serving pockets. Art's fundamental ambiguity is all too often taken as an excuse for forgetting the fundamental, categorical point of publishing in the first place: to *make things public*, to *share matter*. Hence the need to stay on top of the fact that we're in the social business of communication as opposed to the anti-social business of masturbation. This means working against the odds towards a more athletic sense of urgency. For now, the biggest job is to make these intentions as plain as possible without dumbing them down, which would only be to duplicate the levelling tendency of contemporary culture that we're actively trying to work against.

What I'm describing isn't reactionary or anachronistic, but a forward-facing return.

[37] See: Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

[38] Particularly §5.6.




Dexter Sinister, *Work-in-progress* (2013), installation view of reprogrammed basketball scoreboards, joint Lithuania/Cyprus pavilion, Palasport, 2013 Venice Biennale

# 10: THE LAST SHoT CLOCK

This final account of a project under the Dexter Sinister umbrella took place during the final few months' work on this thesis. It comprises four texts written at approximately two-month intervals between October 2013 and June 2014: an interview, an email, an invitation card, and an incantation.

As is necessarily reiterated in each part, the whole thing was based on a pair of eccentric digital clocks made for the joint Lithuania/Cyprus pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Back then we had no real idea why we were making them. Unlike the work recounted in the previous chapters, these clocks weren't made in response to a specific invitation, nor did they otherwise serve any patent function. We simply had the urge to see them exist and so insinuated ourselves into the show.

Slowly, though, an initially free-floating idea assembled itself into a time-travelling talk and an exhibition-of-sorts – and all this backwardness became a key theme of both.

## 10.1: LIKE AN ARROW I WAS ONLY PASSING THROUGH

Sometime in the summer, after the Biennale opened in June, we were invited to contribute to an art journal, *Durch*.[1] The request was conditional: each of us was to start up a conversation with one of the other artists involved with the institution over the last year, to be edited it into a format suitable for the new issue. David and I decided to use the opportunity as an excuse to think through those clocks a bit more – what they were exactly, and what they might become. And so to the annoyance of *Durch*'s editors, we offered to 'interview' each other.

S: The most recent issue of our journal *Bulletins of The Serving Library* was gathered around the theme of 'Germany' and produced according to a kind of motto, *Wie ein Pfeil lief ich einfach durch*. This is a translation of a line from the American not-quite-country singer Bill Callahan: 'Like an arrow I was only passing through.' I'd like to carry the sentiment over to this conversation for a publication auspiciously titled *Durch* – the idea being to forge a few ideas in advance of a work-in-progress provisionally titled *The Last Stop Clock*, to be realized on Summer Solstice 2014 in Vilnius, Lithuania.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

At this year's Venice Biennial, Dexter Sinister was one of the players in the joint Lithuanian-Cypriot Pavilion, which was curated by Raimundas Malašauskas, staged in a Brutalist sports hall called Palasport round the corner from the Arsenale, and presented under the reversible rubric of *Oo* or *oO* (depending on your point of view). For some reason, we were invited to contribute as honorary Lithuanians. The show's locus was a basketball court flanked by concrete bleachers, and we proposed to manipulate the two large scoreboards at either end. We supplied instructions in order to produce a new chip to be inserted in the operating desk that would effectively turn the twin scoreboards into two identically esoteric, hexadecimal clocks that loop through 16 configurations of the characters 'O' or 'o'. These configurations abide a binary, off/on logic to form a digital abacus at odds with our orthodox sense of time: what we commonly understand as 0 translates to 'oooo', 1 to 'oooO', 2 to 'ooOo', 3 to 'ooOO' and on up to the maximum 15 as 'OOOO' before returning to zero. The sequence advanced every second, the two scoreboards in sync – though naturally it was impossible to ever look at both clocks at the same time. An adequately curious onlooker would perhaps gradually realize that what initially seemed to be a random sequence programmed to generate an abstract pattern, was in fact a regular pattern – albeit a pointedly eccentric one.

So far so goOd. Then, on our way to an inaugural *Oo-oO* party that took place within the same hall, lit exclusively by our clocks and organized by someone I was yet to fall in love with, we ran into someone who told us the whole thing had shut down already. Naturally, we headed elsewhere, then

[1] The journal is published very intermittently by Kunstverein Graz, Austria (11 issues since 1986; the last in 2001).

later ran into a couple of Lithuanians who told us it wasn't true – and that we'd missed a great night, which by now was dead for sure.

And ever since, we've conspired to somehow attend the party we missed by way of our time-bending clock. Finally it can be put to use – a use that, as we might have expected, was waiting to be realized all along. So far as we've been able to discern, this will take the form of some kind of talk, or doublespeak which, under the working title *The Last Stop Clock*, will be designed to invoke the party we'd managed to miss – to assemble some kind of *incantation*. In effect, the dual clock becomes a time machine. And what we ought to work out here in all this *Durchtalk* is what on earth to talk *about* – to summon and extrapolate whatever clues are doubtless lying around in fronts of our minds. As far as I can dimly perceive these right now, the talk ought to concern itself with the ways and means of extracting ourselves from the regular coordinates of time and space – and ideally 'concern itself' by embodying what it's talking about.

To begin, then, the other week you gave a small talk on Italian applied artist Bruno Munari, with particular reference to his work for Italian communications media firm Olivetti, and also to an exhibition of neo-avantgarde art called *Arte Programmata* that took place at the firm's showroom in Venice in 1962. With the chip, clock and party in mind, I'd like you to recount as briefly as possible three aspects you touched upon that I think will be instructive here for obvious reasons: first, the relationship between a 'program' and its aesthetic outcome; second, the juxtaposition of so-called 'useless' and so-called 'useful' objects; third, the similarities and dissimilarities between the original 1962 show and a restaging of it in 2012.

D: It is, first, essential to agree on what 'programmed' meant in Milan, in 1962, amongst this group of people. The exhibition *Arte Programmata* translates to 'Programmed Art'. It was organized by Bruno Munari and together with Giorgio Soavi at Olivetti. The theoretical framework of the show came courtesy of Umberto Eco, who was hard at work himself on what would soon become his classic text, *The Open Work.* Anyway, Eco wrote in the catalogue for the show this description of what the word meant. He writes:

> Thus we can speak of 'programmed' art, and admire the kinetic sculptures that a man of a coming future will install in his house, in place of the old prints of the modern masterpieces reproduced. And if someone should observe that this is not painting, nor even sculpture, it should be of no concern. One could then start a contest to find a new name, but let us not be frightened by a question of names.[2]

Which is only to say that the word applies to the work in the exhibition. He clarifies a bit in the ensuing paragraphs and identifies this work as *not* containing any particular expression or representation as such, but rather that it has instead a 'propositional function'. Now that's a lovely idea, but I suppose easy enough to say about lots of work.

Eco gets more particular however when he identifies the proposition (he calls it a 'continually attempted adventure') of being a work that is persistently, irreducibly variable. However, and this is absolutely central, the mutability occurs only *within* precisely determined limits. (A 'possibility space', if you like – I suspect you do.)

This limit, then, is the 'program' to which 'Programmed Art' refers. It's a definite set of instructions, an algorithm, a step-wise recipe whose end result is explicitly, unchangeably, indeterminate. The sum total of all the possibilities of a particular program is easily enough worked out, but the moment that presents itself *now* is utterly unpredictable.

[2] English translation from the revised version of the original exhibition catalogue: Marco Meneguzzo, Enrico Morteo and Alberto Saibene, eds., *Programmare l'arte: Olivetti e le neoavanguardie cinetiche* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2012).

Then this is where it gets interesting, as that unpredictable moment is the now when a viewer is taking in the piece. And the viewer also helps the work along by witnessing it. I could go on about this, but am afraid I'm falling off track.

There are a couple more things that will be quite useful in understanding what 'program' meant then, there. One: Olivetti was making forays into manufacturing computers with its newly formed and ambitious Olivetti Electronics division. They were principally developing room-sized mini computers but also had just released what is sometimes cited as the first desktop personal computer, the Programma 101 programmable calculator. Anyway, computers and the programs that made them worthwhile were increasingly making an impact in the collective imagination of this circle. Two: 'program' at this moment had specifically social overtones, and as Olivetti was a company committed to acting for the good of all society, then this meaning was particularly relevant. So think 'program' as in 'social program' or a definite plan for the future of a large group of people, whose outcome at any particular moment was unpredictable, but whose entire shape over time was visible and intentional.

Meanwhile, Bruno Munari's most insightful and prolific critic Marco Meneguzzo describes what it means like this, which is just concise and precise. Perhaps I might have started here:

> It was not a question of putting technology up on the pedestal of legend, but of the indispensable use of the 'future' – rendered visible by movement – to create a form adequate to the future of the world.[3]

Ok. I am afraid I have to leave your next two questions open. I'm certain we will get back to them, and maybe in the meantime it occurs to me that there is a distinction you could help render more distinct: in *The Open Work*, a book I know that is important to you, Eco marks a difference between an Open Work and a Work-in-Movement. Can you sharpen this up? What precisely is the difference between the two?

S: It's a bit misleading to describe Eco's book, or the essay from which it grew, as a 'classic'. I mean, it's become something of a classic for us, but it's still a minor blip on the radar of aesthetic history. However, I'll take it as an opportunity to digress and wonder exactly how *timely* his ideas were, or are.

The main point I take away from Eco's book is the assertion that Open Works were the most meaningful – or 'authentic' – form of art being made in the time he was writing. Truly pertinent work, says Eco, is that which mirrors an era's general epistemology, so where Medieval art reflected a fixed idea of the cosmos, and Baroque art reflected a shifting, less anthropocentric worldview, Open Works are simply (and complicatedly) the artistic equivalent of contemporaneous thinking that is simultaneously playing out in, say, science and mathematics in terms of relativity, chaos, indeterminacy, and so on.

Now, Eco was writing about this stuff – and *Arte Programmata* is a good example of it – in the early 1960s, which suggests that this is its point of maximum impact, being the moment it becomes conscious of itself. However, in *The Open Work* he draws on many examples from as far back as the second half of the 19th century, Mallarmé in particular, and then on through such as Joyce, Brecht, and Calder, ending up in his own era with examples mostly drawn from avant-garde music, like Stockhausen, Pousseur, and Cage. So it begs the question, how long exactly does Eco's NOW last: The Modernist era? The 20th century? Or does it extend to circumscribe everything after the Enlightenment? More to the point, are we still in it, and what's next? Which is to say, what constitutes an authentic, urgent art today?

But getting to your question, Eco is a bit vague on this distinction between Open Work and Work-in-Movement. Often he seems to use the terms interchangeably, but my summary understanding – which

[3] Marco Meneguzzo, ed., *Arte Programmata e Cinetica in Italia 1958–1968* (Parma: Galleria d'Arte Niccoli, 2000).

I may well have willed into existence according to what I want it to mean – is that where Open Works can refer equally to work that is deliberately *ambiguous*, in the sense of being designed to foster multiple meanings or open interpretations (Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, or Brecht's Epic Theatre, for instance), Works-in-Movement incorporate some explicitly *live* aspect; they involve setting up conditions for something to happen in *realtime*. The work as consists in a script, a set of instructions, or what you just called a 'propositional function' that precipitate a *happening*.

Perhaps it's then unclear exactly *where* the work lies – in the known script or in the as-yet-unknown performance. In fact, I'd say one of the most interesting things about Works-in-Movement, abiding this definition at least, is that the work is both, or neither: it cancels out the question. In this sense, in the Arte Programmata show, a work like Gruppo N's *Bispazio Instabile* (below left) is 'in movement' because the balls can be shuffled, where a static, 'finished' piece like Enzo Mari's *Timor* (below right) isn't. Or: a Calder mobile is, but a Riley op-art painting isn't. Or: an abstract Cardew score is, but a Stockhausen symphony isn't.






Back to Vilnius, all this chimes in the sense that we have an end result in mind: time travel. Appropriately enough, we need to work backwards in order to make it *happen* – which on the face of it isn't straightforward! But the word that keeps popping up, in my mind at least, isn't script or instruction but 'incantation.' Which is perhaps to admit that the nature of what we're after seems less clinical and more, well, spiritual. That's not quite right either, but messing around with space and time certainly suggests something beyond the orthodox laws of physics, more cerebral than physical – Kierkegaard's 'trembling,' perhaps. Stuff that makes you go funny in order to exit regular behaviour. Someone was telling me the other night about a German artist who recently lived for a time according to a 21-hour day, which meant he cycled in and out of the lunar cycle. Obviously this connects with our clocks.

But I've also been thinking along the lines of a symbol or glyph or gnomic text that induces altered consciousness, or even just plain fear – like the Black Spot in R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Something similar happens with the Jesus Prayer in Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. Franny has decided to follow the instructions derived from a book called The Way of the Pilgrim to recite the prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me' incessantly until it becomes unconscious and reflexively in time with her heartbeat, so she's praying without ceasing. At which point: enlightenment.

What interests me right now is the idea that there are all these different ways and means of achieving, or supposedly achieving, such a state in different mediums (the word 'medium' being especially loaded here, of course). Maybe articulating these different ways and means to an audience primed for such an event to the point of trembling in one night on a significant date in the lunar cycle will amount to some multi-dimensional or extra-sensorial grasp of what it means to travel through time. So for the sake of setting off another couple of tangents, if you're going to circumvent the questions I sent first time round, how about these:

First, attached are two versions of what's essentially the same piece of music. It's called 'Goodbye Precious Mountain', by a group that was around in London in the 1990s called Quickspace. Although the tune is essentially the same, the instruments, arrangement and atmosphere are quite different; the main distinction, however, is that one is in 3/4 and one in 4/4 time. I recall that you once tried to

make a single piece of music with two time signatures – or did I dream it? Second, can you retell me the story of that painting in the Lithuanian painting that was hanging innocuously high on one of the walls behind one of the clocks, and whose name we transposed to our own work? Was it just *The Last Painting*?

Damn, I've just listened to the tracks again and they're *both* in 3/4! Why did my ear remember one as 4/4?

D: My first instinct when I sat down to write this reply was that you had made too big of a deal about the word 'classic' that I put in front of *The Open Work* to describe it. I thought I might go back to my original email and edit it – remove the 'classic' and continue on as if nothing happened. Obviously it would be easy enough to do, but I quickly realized it was a bad idea.

Now, don't worry – I'm going to answer your questions but let me stay on this thought for a minute. What happens if I go back and remove that 'classic' from my response? Your reply would then be nonsense. My temporal hijinks would come only at the reader's expense who is trying to string one idea to another in an ongoing chain of cause-and-effect in order to produce meaning.

Still if I'd done it, you could still go back and change your response and seeing as we're writing this completely before it is published then nobody would be the wiser. In fact, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't matter in any way, ethically, conceptually, or practically. We would have gone back and changed what happened in the past but the final printed page would keep our secret.

But email exchanges assume a chronology. The question must come before its response. Or as Bruno Munari said in 1972, 'One thing leads to another.' He later used the phrase to title a series of formal transformations of an oak leaf. This one was the starting point:

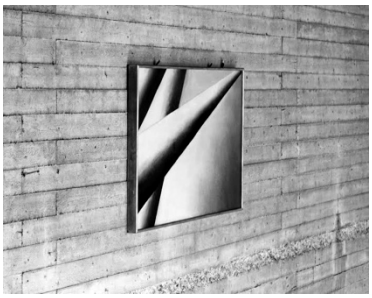


Two Sundays ago I heard a neuroscientist give a talk about how we use spatial metaphors and gestures to talk about time. He described a series of clinical trials where subjects were asked to talk about experiences in the past and experiences in the future. I had never thought of saying that something will happen 'on Thursday' as a metaphor. But a little bit of thought and you realize it is. Well, he videotaped his subjects talking about events in the past and events the future. These were English speakers and almost universally they gestured towards the past with their left hand and towards the future with the right. The neuroscientist suggested this was because the subjects read from left to right. English is written from left to right therefore what we read is in the past or left and what we've not yet read, what is not yet happened, is to the right. He said that speakers of languages that work the other way around, such as Arabic, consistently referred to the past on the right in the future on the left. Interesting enough, but then he decided to test the idea.

He subjected English speakers to one hour of reading mirror writing, which of course goes the other way. Our brains adapt quickly to reading this way. But then he has the same subjects to them tell a story about the past and about the future, their directions had flopped (past on the right and future on the left) after only one hour of reading in the other direction. It seems impossibly simple to redirect the flow of time through a simple act of writing and reading, but maybe this is what Lewis Carroll's Alice knew already from her looking glass world.

Anyway, I've exhausted your patience and so I'll drop this for now and get on to answering the questions, but file it for the future.

You asked me to describe the painting that hung in the Lithuanian pavilion high in the space on the wall of the gymnasium. It's a work by Kazys Varnelis from 2007–8. He was an abstract painter working in Chicago for most of his life, but in his last 15 years he returned to Vilnius and continued to work. On returning home, he found his reputation preceded him. But I think you know this already as you were in Vilnius last week and went to the Varnelis Museum. You sent me pictures and everything. I can't wait to see it myself.



The work in question's name is *The Last Shot* and from what I understand from Raimundas Malašauskas, it was the last painting that Varnelis made. Now what you may not remember is that Rai was describing this work to me about nine months before the Venice Pavilion opened when he came to New York. When he told me the artist's name I said, 'Wow, I know Kazys Varnelis. I had no idea he made paintings.' Well, turns out I know his son. Kazys the Younger lives in New York. He's an architect and he teaches at Columbia. His interests overlap with mine, especially around the archeology of computers and their application to design.

So then I thought it was the son while Raimundas was talking about the father. We continued to discuss 'Kazys', developing a shared idea of this composite figure, half-father half-son, half-architect half-painter – an old man, a young man. You could say it was two different instances of the same thing, but anyway it was clearly a problem of version control. The mistake has kept me thinking since.

Trivial, I suspect. Nonetheless, the painting has a nice title and I suggested that we rename our formerly titled *Work-in-Progress*, *The Last Shot Clock*. This connects back to the painting that initiated the exhibition and hung in the rafters, high above and presiding over the exhibition and our clock. And it also suggests a basketball shot clock, which forces the action and keeps the game moving forward.

Now back to what you wrote. You attached two MP3s which your memory told you were the same song recorded in two different time signatures 3/4 and 4/4. 4/4 is the most common time signature for western music and pop music in particular. The beats of 4/4 count 1 2 3 4 with the emphasis on 1 and 3. 3/4 is a bit less common, it's probably easiest to summon to mind by humming a waltz. The beats in 3/4 time are counted 1 2 3 and the emphasis is on beat 1.

Well I have in fact tried small experiments before to combine a 3/4 time signature and a 4/4 time signature at once. I remember making a small computer program to do this with beeps and it simply overlaid one time on the other. I've no idea where this program is, but the logic is simple. I could remake it easily and I probably should do so. The composite effect that I was so interested in was putting 3/4 on top of 4/4 so that each regime of time, and as the music moves forward, things line up for a minute and then fall quickly out of sync. It's a simple idea, 'polyrhythms' – although actually rather impossible to play, or at least beyond my abilities.

Now I'd still like to return to the questions I left unanswered in my first response: the one about usefulness, and the one about restaging a show from 1962 in 2012. But I'll let these hang right for a while longer while my brain processes them. And this is quite enough for now.

I know you told me that sitting on the bleachers in the Lithuanian pavilion next to Francesca on returning at the end of August was intense. I wonder if you'd like to describe that sensation here.

And perhaps related perhaps not, you seem to be lurching towards the idea of a kind of symbol-meditation-word. Any ideas about what this gateway glyph might look like?

S: Now, of course I was well aware of overstating your ‘classic’ prefix, but precisely because it was a way into what the word made me realize I wanted to talk about (in that particular case, Eco’s *timeliness*). And I know you know *this* because you pulled the same stunt. It all makes me realize that going back and tinkering with some apparently innocuous detail or other – such as the word ‘classic’ – is the classic narrative hinge in all stories about time travel.

With the benefit of hindsight, then, what apparently innocuous detail from the past might have a useful knock-on effect in terms of getting us to the party on time? As we know, the reason we got stopped in our tracks on the way to the party and rudely diverted to an otherwise unremarkable evening at a nondescript bar on the Via Garibaldi, was because our friend Mai Abu ElDahab insisted – I mean really almost *suspiciously* insisted – that it was all over and useless to even double-check, even though we were only some 200 meters away from the building. So her flawed conviction is clearly the fork, the portal, the dark matter in this backstory.

When I was in Lithuania talking about all this with another curator, Jonas Zakaitis, last week, he suggested that we ought to make sure Mai attends our Solstice event in Vilnius, but then make sure she gets stopped on the way and told the whole thing has ended. Okay, that’s more cosmic payback than tinkering with cause and effect, but perhaps it triggers something.

I’m going to address both your questions. They’ll be on the long side, so I suggest we eventually cut-and-paste the second one to somewhere later in the text. That way it’ll seem more like a steady flow than a deluge.

In the pavilion with Francesca – where to start? Basically, within the first few minutes of entering the sports hall on the morning of the opening day of the Biennial I fell in love. The crux of this event involved our sitting and talking at the foot of the steps in the sports hall for about ten minutes. To say this was ‘intense’ is the biggest understatement of this discussion, even though half of it is yet to be written. Suffice to say that from this point on everything changed irrevocably: I knew and thought things I had simply never known or thought before.

However, you’re asking not about this occasion, but rather our revisiting the same spot at the end of the summer, now as a bona fide couple. The sense of strangeness in returning to such a romantically-charged location can’t be that unusual, of course, but I do think it was heightened by being so relatively soon after the original event, as though the magnetic pull between the two times was still very strong. ‘Magnetism’ is actually a fairly good description of what I felt sitting on the bottom step the second time around. I don’t just mean this in an obvious romantic sense, but physically – as if I were in an energy field. One consequence of this was heightened perception. This is going to be hard to swallow, I know, but I swear I could see all the works, including the clocks, in higher definition.

But I also recall feeling somehow confused by the order of these two times at the foot of the concrete bleachers. No, not confused – I was fully aware, of course, that I was recalling the first time during the second. It was more a sense that the order *didn’t matter*; that these two times on the step in June and August were somehow the same moment. No time had passed, or all the time in the world had passed. I could perhaps best summarize it as a suddenly holistic sense of time.

Love is, of course, famously out of time – beyond the regular laws of time and space, I mean. Here’s a fragment from Milan Kundera’s *Testaments Betrayed* I came across around the time we started this exchange. I’ve been waiting for a chance to share it ever since:

> Ecstasy means being ‘outside oneself,’ as indicated by the etymology of the Greek word: the act of leaving one’s position (stasis). To be ‘outside oneself’ does not mean outside the present moment, like a dreamer escaping into the past or future. Just the opposite: ecstasy is absolute identity with the present instant, total forgetting of past and future. If we obliterate the future and the past, the present

> moment stands in empty space, outside life and its chronology, outside time and independent of it (this is why it can be likened to eternity, which too is the negation of time).[4]

So yes, this is the sort of thing I felt on the steps – outside myself and outside chronology. It's well worth adding, too, that Kundera notes that the classic state of ecstasy, and so the classic state of being 'outside' is the orgasm. Which is perhaps a bit much to expect from a talk in a Contemporary Art Center, Summer Solstice or not.

Regarding the glyph: I have no idea what I'm talking about, what I'm trying to conjure here, but at least one instructive instance comes to mind. There's a remarkable short story by David Foster Wallace called 'Good Old Neon' that consists in a matter-of-fact account of events leading up to the suicide of an identity-scrambled protagonist. The story initially seems to be recounted in the first person – albeit from the afterlife – by someone called Neal; but later a second character called 'David Wallace' claims to have projected the whole thing. All of which is deliberately obfuscating for good reason. What *is* clear is that the 'first' protagonist deliberately and fatally drives his car off an unfinished bridge.

But the story has at least two more-or-less parallel endings. These are not exactly 'false' or 'alternative,' but rather convey the multiple dimensions of time, character and consciousness that amount to the story's fairly plausible-sounding description of what it's like to die – the promise of which is causally advertised early in the text:

> Right? This is what everyone wants to know. It's not what anyone thinks, for one thing. The truth is you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors.

And then:

> Because listen – we don't have much time, here's where Lily Cache slopes slightly down and the banks start getting steep, and you can just make out the outlines of the unlit sign for the farmstand that's never open anymore, the last sign before the bridge – so listen: What exactly do you think you are? The millions and trillions of thoughts, memories, juxtapositions – even crazy ones like this, you're thinking – that flash through your head and disappear? Some sum or remainder of these? Your history? Do you know how long it's been since I told you I was a fraud? Do you remember you were looking at the RESPICEM watch hanging from the rearview and seeing the time, 9:17? What are you looking at right now? Coincidence? What if no time has passed at all? The truth is you're already heard this. That this is what it's like. That it's what makes room for the universes inside you, all the endless inbent fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul.[5]

Ok, two things I want to add here:

[4] Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* [1993, French] (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 83.

[5] David Foster Wallace, 'Good Old Neon', *Oblivion* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004), p. 178–9

First, Wallace's writing in 'Good Old Neon' seems to affect me not only cerebrally, but physiologically. This certainly has something to do with his famously overextended use of footnotes, endnotes, and other formal mechanisms that deliberately disorient by setting off parallel tracks of writing liable to induce a certain nausea – something akin to carsickness or vertigo. More particularly, though, Wallace's writing is, I think, designed to demand an emphatically *involved* reading. All the absurdly long sentences, clauses within clauses within clauses, idiosyncratic speech tics, countless repetitions, elliptical phrasing, and so on, force the reader to read and re-read, constantly in a state of stalling and re-orientating. This involves considerable – and to me entirely profitable – mental labor. In a word: investment.

'Good Old Neon' is an extreme case of the loopy focus necessary to work out what and how and ultimately *who* the hell is going on – and this is fully consonant with what I read as the ambition to articulate a sense of having transcended time, one that's commensurate with Kundera's description of ecstasy.

This seems to overlap with your account of how writing direction influences our mental conception of time – that the structure of writing *does something* to the body above or below consciousness. Both point to the idea of a particularly libidinal writing that induces some sort of altered state.
The same goes for Franny Glass's prayer. She was after the peace of enlightenment; we're chasing hypothetical transport into the past. Nice this term, too: *transporting*.

Second, I said that 'Good Old Neon' has 'at least' two parallel endings, and that's because there's a plausible third in the form of a mysterious glyph at the bottom right-hand corner of the last page, ranged right a couple of lines after the end of the main body of text. Properly speaking, it's not a glyph at all, more a cluster of characters, but they certainly operate on me in the way I'm imagining the way a time-travel trigger might.

On first glance this impenetrable little row of characters seems innocent enough, but it increasingly gave me The Fear. I read it, vaguely, as some kind of ultra-compressed language from the afterlife, a virtual message in a bottle [in brackets] as though if you could crack the code you'd release an infinity of thought and feeling (which is more or less how Wallace describes dying), like a linguistic pi.

[→NMN.80.418]

However, according to some cursory internet sleuthing, it turns out that the 'glyph' is actually nothing more sinister than a composite baseball rating, ending with a batting average (.418). Inasmuch as the story's protagonist seems to be based on an actual colleague of the actual Wallace in high school or college (initials NMN), it's plausible that this value is real-world character's actual rating that year ('80) on the date of his death. If so, it thus serves as a very odd and very American 'in memoriam.' It's perhaps clear, then, that the story is performing, or Fostering, its own brand of scrambled semi-autobiographical time-travel too.

I want to leave you with the thought that the mere *suggestion* that this sports rating meant something more was all it took to set me off on my own speculation, which as I say was partly physiological – a queasiness induced by the mere anticipation of what it might contain: 'sick with anxiety.' But also that this 'glyph' works only in conclusion, that is, in the wake of a 40-page setup that's already played havoc with your temporals. In other words, it more readily transports the close reader whose sensibilities have been adequately primed.

Anyway, no new question for you. I'll leave you some space to answer the earlier one.

D: No question is a gift, seeing as I have two held in reserve from before. An absolutely trivial thought, but one that never leaves my brain: it is endlessly fascinating how the same thing held in delay means something different when it finally appears. I find it reassuring (not sure why) that one thing can stay the same over time and yet the world spins around it and when that thing that has stayed the same

appears again later, then it is changed by virtue that everything else has moved on. It is in no way related to nostalgia or conservatism, but often gets mistaken for such. I simply find it fantastic that a thing can change without changing, yet it happens every day.

Since it has been a number of paragraphs and a matter of months since your initial questions that I'll answer now, I should restate them: you asked about 'the juxtaposition of so-called 'useless' and so-called 'useful' objects' in the *Arte Programmata* exhibition that Bruno Munari staged with Olivetti in 1962; you also asked about 'the similarities and dissimilarities between the original 1962 show and a restaging of it in 2012.' I'll take the first question, first.

The Olivetti showroom in Venice was brand new when *Arte Programmata* opened in 1962. Second-generation company director Adriano Olivetti commissioned local architect Carlo Scarpa to design the space in an existing building on Piazza San Marco in the heart of the city. As with many of Olivetti's art and design commissions of the time, this space was as much a place to showcase Scarpa's architectural talents and Olivetti's enlightened commissioning program as it was to display Olivetti's typewriters and calculators. The interior of the small space is rather like a jewel box, arranged on two levels with sightlines and view portals throughout. From upstairs in the corner, you might catch a glimpse of the bronze sculpture that anchors the entrance while passing by a textured concrete wall and walnut cabinetry. It is absolutely 'modern' but in Scarpa's specific vernacular it feels connects to a much longer time-scaled tradition of design, there. It seems assertively Italian, or Venetian anyway, from what I can tell.

Inside the showroom are rows of Olivetti products sat on shelves and presented one after the other. It is more or less a 1962 Apple Store, but as it is both from that time and in Italy, the ahistorical sheer, slick surfaces and glass staircases of Apple are replaced by textured concrete, inset brass, and beautifully worked walnut, old and new at once. The stark modernity of the Olivetti products are given a historical frame to live in, and the result is both generous and shocking. It must have looked bracingly new and absolutely fantastic in 1962 as far as I can tell from 2013.



The artworks included in the exhibition organized by Munari were much like products themselves. In fact, the artists that participated in the show often insisted on this rhetoric in place of 'artwork' to name the things that they were making. Most of the artists worked collectively (Gruppo T and Gruppo N, for example) and their works were made as multiples, rather than as unique objects. Each also insisted on the industrial manufacture of their ideas, which facilitated production and a corresponding pricetag much closer to a product than a sculpture.

The installation of these works in the show was done in line with the existing products, so that the new pieces were added to the existing display as if they were simply another Olivetti offering. The purpose of, for example, Gruppo N's *Bispazio Instabile* is not quite as concrete as say what the Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter is meant to do, however the exhibition design placed these two cheek-by-jowl to induce an explicit correspondence. The artworks in the show, produced as multiples and framed as products, were intended to be useful, to be functional. The artists rejected conventional wisdom that use is the enemy of art, and suggested another more complicated equation. As a glass-sided vertical box

containing something like 100 small red and white balls and a handle on the side of the object intended to mix the arrangements of the two to produce a new composition, this *Bispazio Instabile* was an artwork that signalled a specific function. Its handle makes it read first as something to be used, to be manipulated. And in fact this was the point – the work provides an explicit invitation to remake it yourself, to shuffle the balls, produce a new constellation, and in so doing, to get an intuitive feel of what it is to rearrange reality, to change the current situation, to simply move forward in time. You'll remember from before that I quoted Marco Meneguzzo on how the works work, and I am afraid that bears repeating:

> It was not a question of putting technology up on the pedestal of legend, but of the indispensable use of the 'future' – rendered visible by movement – to create a form adequate to the future of the world.

In 2012 the Fondazione Olivetti restaged the exhibition in its original Venice venue. In the meantime, Olivetti had withered to 1/4 of its 1962 size – by the 1990s, typewriting and calculating were not the growth industries they once were. The company's computer efforts were not having any success against dominant rivals. By 1999, and already part-owned by Pirelli and Benetton, Olivetti attempted a hostile takeover of the formerly nationalized Telecom Italia. Although a fraction of its target size, Olivetti succeeded in taking over the phone company only to realize that what they got in return was a mountain of debt. The relationship was soon inversed with Telecom Italia retroactively swallowing Olivetti. Since, Olivetti has half-heartedly entered the tablet computer business. A similar fate attended the San Marco showroom, and by the 1990s it was sold and refashioned as a tacky tourist souvenir shop.

In 1998, Bruno Munari died. Ten years later, the Olivetti foundation had re-acquired the original showroom space and was working to restore it to its previous splendour. The renovation job was immaculate, refinishing all of the space's surfaces, its architecture, and artwork, as well as restoring a complete collection of Olivetti products, which would have been displayed in the space in 1962. To mark the reopening of the showroom in concert with the 2012 Architecture Biennale, *Arte Programmata* was scheduled to be reinstalled in the space as well. The new version of the exhibition was titled *Programmare l'Arte* in a pun that shifted the original title and converts the original adjective 'Programmed' to an imperative verb: *Program*.



In the intervening 50 years, although the showroom and the exhibition were materially the same as they were in 1962, everything else around them had changed. So the showroom, which was initially built to showcase Olivetti's most current technology, now functions as a museum of antique products from Olivetti in the 1960s. These typewriters and calculators are presented exactly as they were then, although with contextualizing labels so that we can read their original functions at such a temporal distance. The works from *Arte Programmata* were also installed in the space as they were originally. Many of these works were either rehabilitated or reconstructed, but given their original dictate of industrial manufacture then this seems entirely appropriate. The relationships between useless and useful had directly inverted in the meantime, like a switch that throws the direction of electrical current, swapping its positive and negative poles: the products were no longer really products, but historical artifacts, and therefore not explicitly useful; the artworks however, remained more or less the same – as useless and/or useful as they had been when originally exhibited. I'd even guess that with 50 years,

their values have hewed closer to being useful through an explicitly educational aspect which teaches us how to think about the way things change.

I'll just end on the idea that I've set on your mental table previously. When we originally made the work in Venice, we proposed it under the title *Work-In-Progress* with the idea that whatever we would make for the exhibition using the scoreboards would evolve over time and even likely not be present at the opening of the exhibition. We nearly got our wish when the chip that we had made to alter the electronic scoreboard's program managed to short circuit the controller and send the display into a freakout less than two hours before the opening visits. Graciously, the electronics reconsidered and we were able to get the setup working in time for the jury's visit and opening.

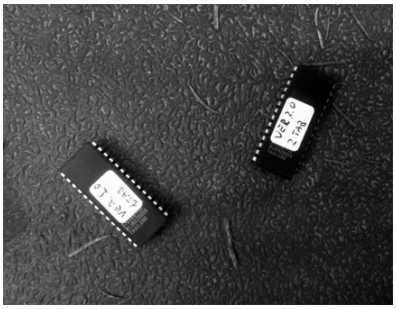
As part of our *Work-In-Progress*, we suggested that the scoreboard display sequence would act as a score for a performance to follow some time after the show closed. To that end, we arranged a fairly elaborate setup to record the twin displays in the space with the idea that the resulting video would be our score. Well, in the meantime, I've had further thoughts that perhaps it would be a measure more productively uncanny to remanufacture the scoreboard itself and use two of these during our intended performance in the space at Centre for Contemporary Art in Vilnius, to act as our performance timer and travel vehicle. As I write this, I have Wallace's menacing glyph up on my screen and I too find it fascinating. I can barely keep my eyes off of it and I suspect these scoreboards might function similarly to provide cover for when, during the midst of our doubletalk, we *poof* disappear to attend a previous engagement.

S: There's something in this sleight of hand you describe, I'm sure. Do you remember that *New Yorker* article not so long ago about the Las Vegas 'magician' who specialized in pickpocketry? It included a surprisingly technical account of the psychological manipulation involved – the guy's ability to divert the immediate attention of the person in front of him …

D: Yes, I remember.

S: Well, it reminds me of a quite possibly apocryphal story on a somewhat grander scale that I heard years ago and still think about a lot. (I could check whether it actually happened easily enough, but like the idea too much to risk spoiling my version.) It took place during some massive gig by either Jean-Michelle Jarre or David Copperfield – who seem to have morphed into a single personality for me, like your and Raimundas's composite Kazys. The event took place on the Champ de Mars in Paris in front of the Eiffel Tower. As it commenced, giant curtains were hoisted up around the audience to mask out the view of the tower. The show proceeded along tediously spectacular lines, then culminated with Jarre-Copperfield announcing that he had moved the Eiffel Tower. The curtains fell and (touché!) the Tower was indeed no longer in front of the audience, but (gasp!) behind them. Turns out he'd pulled off the illusion by having the audience sat on a construction that rotated imperceptibly throughout the show, so by the time of the climax they'd turned exactly 180 degrees.

About remanufacturing the basketball clocks: I'm by no means averse to this, but practically how do you imagine doing it, given that they presumably cost about Eu 50,000 a shot and our budget is more likely about 1/50th of this? I'm supposing you're thinking of newly fabricating along the same lines as the *Programmare l'Arte*, i.e. these are industrial products that can effectively be duplicated any time any place. I think I agree in principle that this would be a good deal more psychically potent than simply showing the videos of the previous clocks, but another, cheaper option would be to have a live transmission of the clocks rebooted to function once more according to our base-16 time. This would of course appear identical to the films, yet amount to a whole different proposition; and seeing as how we're deliberately messing with fate here, a far more appropriately charged one – charged not least with the distinct possibility of the transmission fucking up. Incidentally, the chips that change the clock to *our* time are still in a safely guarded envelope somewhere in the offices of Palasport.



A further option, though, would be to produce our own ‘real’ clocks (to operate in situ during the talk) as primitively and inexpensively as possible. By which I mean to assemble our own analogue binary 4-unit base-16 version of that basic clock diagram we’ve written about before, employing the most rudimentary forms of power, display and resonator. I can picture two attractively jerry-rigged devices that hypnotize in the same manner as Fischli & Weiss’s *The Way Things Go*, for example – which I can easily imagine usefully ‘diverting the immediate attention of the people in front of us’.

Perhaps it’s useful to remind ourselves of the actual ‘possibility space’ we’ve decided as the setting for the solstice event – a marble-paved courtyard bang in the middle of the Contemporary Art Centre more usually occupied by smokers at openings. Seems to me it’s a perfectly ‘limited’ space in which to ‘program’ something at midnight on the cusp of June 20 and 21.

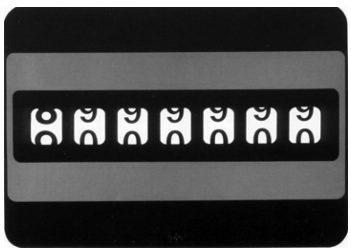


It’s also possible to occupy the three walls just inside the building that run around the courtyard, and I wonder if it mightn’t be a good idea to populate those walls with some of the potentially totemic items we’ve listed here. For instance, Varnelis’s painting (which happens to be housed across the road), an Olivetti typewriter or calculator or computer, one or more of the pieces from *Arte Programmata* or *Programmare l’Arte*, and perhaps some other obviously related pieces, such as the manipulated Casio watch we made with Eric Wysocan (in which time snakes through the LCD), the 1200 dpi scan we made of an analogue watch (to capture its second hand bending back across 5 seconds), or Alighiero e Boetti’s print *Contatore* (that shows an odometer on the point of changing from 8999999 to 9000000). I can imagine such artifacts getting drawn into the event, becoming props – and perhaps such a display could serve as a preface or epilogue before and after the Solstice moment.









Funny that I remembered our calling our thing 'The Last *Stop* Clock' and you 'The Last *Shot* Clock'. Once again, I guess it's both. A stop clock (or stopwatch) is based on time counting up, while a shot clock (which counts down basketball's 35-second deadline) is based on time running out. It seems to me that many of the clues assembling here similarly imply performing two essentially opposite things at once – see too the *Casa* and *Ospiti* (Home and Guests) on the scoreboard.

One last thing I want to mention concerns the book you implored me to read around this time last year, Quentin Meillassoux's *The Number and the Siren*.[6] As you know, this is an extremely close and fairly bizarre reading of Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal 1897 poem 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard'. Meillassoux's analysis, which is more police procedural than literary criticism, unpacks Mallarmé's intentions via a highly specific (and contentious) numerology. Note that numerology means 'any study of the purported divine, mystical or other special relationship between a number and some coinciding observed (or perceived) events.'

I don't want to go into the book in detail here, only remind you of the closing pages in which Meillassoux reflects on the case he's just finished making. He basically acknowledges that it must be difficult to gauge how serious or ridiculous his thesis is – even how much Meillassoux himself is convinced of his fairly wild reasoning. To ask this question, he says, is precisely to miss the point; what matters is not that an idea is plausible, only that it has ample energy – an energy that is in this case ideally manifest as a piece of work, as art.

Otherwise put, Meillassoux, like Mallarmé before him, is possibly taking the piss, possibly not, but it doesn't matter either way. There's footage online of him delivering an abbreviated version of the book at Miguel Abreu's gallery and he remains fantastically inscrutable throughout.[7] Even when the audience is laughing at some of the more dubious leaps and bounds in his theory, his delivery remains totally deadpan, always *almost* smiling the half-smile of someone who knows he's onto something: a work-in-progress.




10.2: A LIVE VENN DIAGRAM

The last of the images included in-line with the interview text sent off to Graz was this photograph of a piece of work we'd made in the interim called *Poster for an Infinite Solstice Event*. It's an immaterial 'poster' made from a lozenge of light projected through a 35mm slide onto a wall, with the projector set at an angle so the image appears as a kind of cartoon poster receding off into a third dimension. The poster's immaterial material, light, doubles as an image of the anniversary's fundamental point. It was made for inclusion in the group exhibition *Reflections from Damaged Life* at Raven Row, London, in

[6] Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren* [French, 2011] (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012).

[7] http://vimeo.com/42719285.

late 2013.[8] As usual, there's a longer backstory; the short version is that the 'poster' was originally conceived to advertise a specific solstice party in Copenhagen in June 2012, only the idea expanded to become a *perpetual* advert, designed to promote *any* summer solstice event (which always occurs on the 20th or 21st of June).

And so when we started to plan the event in Vilnius, as with the latent function we were busy contriving for the clocks, we could likewise put this poster to use by programming the incantation to take place on the 20th or 21st June (or as it happened, on the cusp). This nominal deadline finally forced some focus:

David,

Yesterday I began to think more concertedly about the script or score for Vilnius. To sum up what I think is more or less on the tip of our minds, the idea is

– to write some long talk-lecture-performance-show, with both of us reading, maybe in tandem for at least some of the time, or more likely ping-pong from one end of the 'court' to the other, racking up 'points';

– these points will be anecdotes/vignettes that have something to do with ways and means of extracting ourselves from orthodox perceptions of time and space, along with the premise and subsequent narrative of our involvement in the Lithuanian Pavilion in Venice;

– which ought to amount to some kind of *incantation*, a spell that allows us (and an audience along for the ride) to attend the party we missed a year before, as an embodiment of the sorts of time travel we'll have been talking about.

Now, working pragmatically backwards, which is to say, per William James, according to *an attitude of orientation* that involves 'looking away from first things (preconceptions, principles, categories, and supposed necessities) and towards last things (results, fruits, and consequences)',[9] we can also dimly perceive in that this thing

– ought to last as long as an audience can reasonably take, which is to say the same as any usual public talk, maybe a half-hour minimum (to get into something with a reasonable degree of concentration) and two-hour maximum (Quentin Meillassoux's notably lengthy talk on Mallarmé at Miguel Abreu's gallery was roughly that long, and I was with him all the way.[10]

– might involve assorted props, bits of other media (music, film, images, objects), possibly other people, and immediate or latent reference to stuff on the walls surrounding the courtyard.

– would ideally be recited (from memory) rather than read or improvised. Incidentally, it occurs to me that the *asterisks* we've started using as an orthographic emphasis distinct from bold or italic, already seem in the realm of incantation; I always see them a kind of *clandestine* emphasis, more of a hint or allusion, something *secretive* at least. You have to get it to get it, but it's not that hard to get – and once you've got it once you've got it for good!

All of which suggests to me to write the thing according to some specific *meter*. Partly because repetition is a classic characteristic of an incantation (like the physiological effect of Franny Glass's 'Jesus Prayer' that I mentioned in our *Durch* discussion), but also because, if we're intending to learn it in order to recite it, such a rhythm would likely function as an *aide memoire*. Plus of course, the whole event is anyway based on the strict repetitive rhythm of the clocks.

[8] *A History of Irritated Material*, Raven Row, London, 26 September – 15 December, 2013.

[9] William James, *Pragmatism* [1907] (London: Signet, 1970).

[10] See fn. 7.

Bear with me.

I began by reminding myself of a play written by the British writer B.S. Johnson called *You're Human Like the Rest of Them*, an unremittingly bleak piece of work from 1964 concerning the decay of the human body. What's interesting for us is that he wrote it according to a syllabic system – in this case ten syllables per line. There's no obvious connection between this formal system and the subject matter, other then perhaps matching the terseness of its point. But the fact that there isn't one could be instructive: what *might* such a direct link between meter and matter mean? That said, Johnson did allude to something like the 'timely pertinence' of this formal conceit, writing that syllabics 'is more suited to 1964 than clapped-out stress meters'. In other words, he's arguing for something less rigid than older conventions that involve certain repeated patterns of stress or vowel length. I don't understand why syllabics might be more in tune with 1964 than 1864, but I'm curious.

Here's an excerpt. You can clearly see/hear the syllabics, with the lines of ten syllables broken by a slash:

> Shut up you little bastards, just shut up!/
> I'm trying to teach you something real, real!/
> Something that I've learnt for myself this time/
> Something that has to do with all of you/[11]

Also interesting to note is that not all the lines in the play are necessarily spoken in their entirety by the same actor; they can be split among actors so long as the rhythm is maintained.

So this was the sort of thing I had in mind. It led me, obviously enough, to the thought that we ought to structure our thing not according to 10 but 16 beats – 16 syllables – in order to match the clock's hexadecimal loop. It occurred to me, too, that, as we'd each be facing a clock, we could conceivably read to the same speed – in which case the live sound and the prerecorded image would be 'doing the same'. There *must* be something in that synchronicity.

Looking into the mechanics of prosody a bit more, *meter* refers to the basic rhythmic structure of verse. There are four basic types: (1) accentual, (2) syllabic, (3) accentual-syllabic, and (4) quantitative. The first three are fairly self-evident (i.e. a poem can be primarily based on accents or syllables, or both equally). 'Quantitative' refers to poems organized according to vowel length rather than stress; it's an anachronism, specifically used in classical Greek and Latin verse.

The most elemental units of meter are *feet*. These can comprise any number of syllables, but they're most commonly in twos or threes, because repeating patterns of more than that would be hugely limiting. The most well known meter is the 10-syllable iambic pentameter: five feet each comprising an *iamb*, which is the name for a two-syllable foot comprising a weak and a strong accent in that order.

A further useful technical term to introduce in this brief poetry primer is *scansion*, which refers to the way of representing the relative stress of metrical units. Unlike musical notation, there are many types of scansion, which can be as rudimentary as 'der-DUM'. I'm going to stick to what seems to be about the most common: a weak accent represented by 'x', strong represented by '/'. So an example of an *iambic* pentameter would be:

× / × / × / × / × /

i.e. 'so LONG as MEN can BREATHE or EYES can SEE'

To some extent all of this will be important later, but without going into too much detail you can imagine all variations of weak and strong stress applied to the binary of a two-pronged foot: 'x x' or '/ /' or 'x /' or '/ x'. As I'll explain in a bit, we might be concerned with the last one, which is to say strong

[11] Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 177.

stress first, or iambic in reverse, which is known as noun *trochee* or adjective *trochaic*. A *trochaic* pentameter is:

/ × / × / × / × /

i.e. ‘SO long AS men CAN breathe OR eyes CAN see’

The main thing to take from this, simple as it seems, is that an iambic or trochaic foot is binary, and another way of writing the relative stress would be using not ‘x’ and ‘/’ but ‘O’ and ‘o’. Hold that thought.

Now, as well as pentameters, comprising 5 feet of however many syllables (in the above examples, 2 each), there are tetrameters (4 feet), trimeters (6 feet), heptameters (7 feet), and octameters (8 feet) – and in theory proceeding beyond in either direction, but again, barely used for obvious reasons. To work within a meter that corresponds with our clocks’ 16, then, the most obvious choice would be the last one listed here, octameter. That’s 8 feet with (in the simplest, most manageable and common form) 2 syllables each: 8 x 2 = 16.

It all sounds more complicated than it actually is, but it seems important to understand the architecture. To be clear, we could simply write in lines of 16 syllables without any stress pattern – technically speaking, ‘a bunch of 16-syllable lines’; octameter specifically refers to 8 instances of a recurring pattern on a single line – a pattern that could be iambic or trochaic or etc.

I started looking a bit more into octameters; turns out it’s a very rarely used system. The most famous use of octameter by a long shot is by Edgar Allen Poe in his most well-known poem, *The Raven* (1845). Here’s the first verse:

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
> While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
> As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
> ‘’Tis some visitor,’ I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door –
> Only this, and nothing more.’

*The Raven* isn’t comprised *exclusively* of octameters;. Poe also occasionally mixes in heptameter and tetrameter lines. These are all conventions, not officially imposed rules; poetry frequently involves setting up such a system in order to break it to expressive effect. In any case, Poe was after something distinctly new here. In one account he writes that *The Raven* was a concerted attempt to form something new out of two existing ideas that so far as he knew had never been combined. One was a particular *kind of story* of the sort such as X writes; the other was a particular *form of poetry* such as Y writes. He laments that X typically used dull means to tell his great stories, while Y was the opposite – interesting forms, boring tales. X was all about content, Y all about form. Poe’s aim was to combine the two in one poem. Sound familiar?

Incredibly, a year after writing *The Raven*, Poe wrote a backwards account of how he came to write it called ‘The Philosophy of Composition’.

So I’ve started to try and write something based on this appropriately backwards philosophy drawn directly from our *Durch* conversation, turning rambling prose into tight pseudo-poetry comprising 16-syllable lines, to be read in either octametric iambics or trochaics (I’m not sure). It seems to *work*, whatever the hell that might mean. What *do* I mean? I think simply that the form felt natural, fluid, generative – a set of tangibly productive limits.

I should add that *The Raven* is written (mostly) in octametric trochaics, meaning the stress comes on the first beat of the binary feet. Also, this ‘stress’ is not as straightforward as it first sounds. You might reasonably assume that stress is inherent to the form/pronunciation of a given word; however, different people accentuate words differently according to, well, their accent. So for instance the word ‘delay’ could be spoken equally ‘DE-lay’ or ‘de-LAY’ and both would be correct. Even regardless of accents,

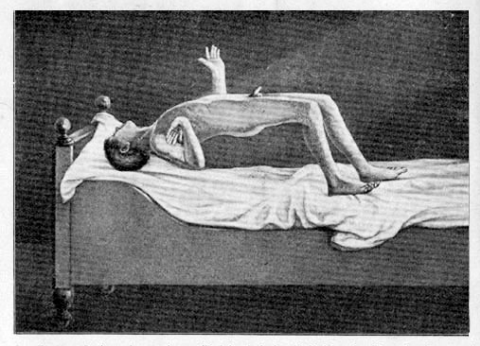
you can anyway stress words as you like, of course. Try reading the first line from *The Raven* according to both iambic and trochaic emphasis – you can do it, only one sounds more perverse and contrived than the other because Poe, being a poet, chose his words according to the specific format. In some cases, a 'perverse' effect might be entirely desirable, too. In any case, it helps to think in terms of *beats* or *pulses* rather than accents – slightly less specific terms and more apt because of it.

Here's where it gets interesting.

*The Raven* is generally regarded as a 'mesmeric' poem, and further, that this quality is partly or largely down to the particular use of octametric meter. If you buy that, octameter seems ideally suited for our purposes, given that we're out to achieve some kind of group hypnosis. Moreover, in obscure confirmation of its mysteriously 'mesmeric' quality, Poe describes *The Raven* as 'octametre *acatalectic'*. 'Acatalectic' means dropping the last syllable or syllables for effect, so it refers to something deliberately structurally 'incomplete' or 'open'. And even more moreover, according to a close friend who knows Greek and Latin, 'catalectic' derives from the same root as *catalepsy*:

> A physical condition usually associated with catatonic schizophrenia, characterized by suspension of sensation, muscular rigidity, fixity of posture, and often by loss of contact with environment.'
>
> Origin: 1350–1400; Medieval Latin *catalēpsia*, variant of Late Latin *catalēpsis*; Greek *katálēpsis* seizure (akin to *katalambánein* to hold down), equivalent to *kata- cata-* + *lêpsis*, a grasping (*lēp-*, variant stem of *lambánein*, to grasp + *-sis -sis*)

Loss of contact with environment + grasping = perfect. Then again, we don't particularly want to induce this:



Finally, or rather in parallel, I started to envisage a structure for the solstice event. We talk briefly in the *Durch* thing about how the build-up, the expectation, the anticipation, is essential to the proper functioning of a spell or incantation. The ominous black spot in *Treasure Island* can cause a hardened sailor to faint on sight if his nervous system has been adequately wound up by force of rumour. And so we ought to frame the event in such a way that guarantees maximum suspense, building towards a climax that coincides with *realizing* the party.

To that end, my instinct is to intersperse the Venice narrative with a series of more generalized space-time vignettes, in such a way that their combinatory *point* is only gradually revealed. Classic storytelling, of course, but in this case it's a two-fold story. What I mean is:

– Narrative 1: Venice; Lithuanian pavilion; making the clocks, as yet without explaining how they 'work', or even insinuating there's a pattern at all.

– Anecdotes 1: So for instance the 'Good Old Neon' glyph, or the *Arte Programmata* principle, Franny Glass's prayer, or backwards handwriting, or any other relevant anecdote we've come across since that *Durch* discussion, like the theory of 'Superposition' in Quantum Physics – or indeed Poe's 'Theory of Composition'.

– Narrative 2: Missing the party, as yet without saying that what we're trying to do here is get back to it; ideally, if we construct this correctly, an audience will gradually start to suspect/intuit/guess that's what this is about – or even better, will realize it at exactly the same moment we come clean, so to speak.

– Anecdotes 2: More of the same.

– Narrative 3: Explanation that what we're attempting here is then to get back in time by summoning instances from other domains – entirely straight-faced.

– Anecdotes 3: Ditto.

– Narrative 4: Explanation of the clock pattern everyone's been in/advertently staring at for the past X minutes *and* explanation of the *equivalent* form of the octametric script we've been reading (we'd be able to quote lines from *The Raven* without disrupting our meter); perhaps this is the part we read in parallel.

– Coda: Close with some sort of transcendence/comedown vignette – ?

My thinking is that, after the composite two-fold buildup, that *double reveal* of the clock and the script really triggers what we're out to achieve – time *thickening*. The audience would comprehend *as a group* that the visual structure of the clocks and the linguistic structure of the script overlap – the grey area, the dark matter, in a live Venn diagram. Surely *that* would add up to some kind of *trembling*. OooooOOOOooOOOOoooOOo.

That doesn't seem like such a long shot. It excites me to no end, anyway, and that's what matters right now.

Finally, in light of all this, consider what a useful writing template might look like – something equivalent to the blank staves on a standard page of sheet music. I imagine dividing each line into 16 units with discreet hyphens (-), plus a caesura (‖) in the middle to allow for easier reading/breathing, and perhaps some indication of the relative stress of the beats, whether iambic or trochaic (assuming we decide to stress the feet at all). We ought to also make sure to leave space above or below lines to work out these lines, as I imagine it's going to take a whole lot of trial and error to force-fit our logorrhea into such a small container.

For now,

Stuart

## 10.3: SOLSTICE EVENT

With the basic idea in place, we settled on that graphic template and began compressing the *Durch* text into syllabics. Meanwhile, we also began to inventorize a number of pieces of work that could serve as visual 'annotations' to the spoken piece, all in some way concerned with 'exiting regular modes of time.' About half of these were things we'd made ourselves in the past few years, such as the reverse-engineered digital watch we made with Eric Wysocan, *Watch Wyoscan 0.5hz* (in which the current time snakes through the elements of the LCD display on the verge of legibility); the 16-minute 'program that runs a script' *Letter & Spirit* (which tells the story of our update of Donald Knuth's Metafont project),[12] and that infinite solstice poster.

The other half was made up of others' work past and present, including a number of Italian artworks from the 1960s and 70s (a multiple by Bruno Munari, a print by Alighiero e Boetti, and a photo-collage by Giuseppe Penone). The most recent *and* earliest work was a commissioned copy of an oil painting

[12] See §8.1.

by Kazimir Malevich titled *Sisters*. Dated 1910 on the back of the canvas, on first glance the painting appears to be a rudimentary exercise in Impressionist technique.



It turns out that Malevich actually painted it in the late 1920s, then *back*dated it to appear as a logical point on a trajectory of stylistic progress. We'd come across the work thanks to some notes written by a friend of a friend, Perrine Bailleux, after she came across the painting and its accompanying caption at a recent Malevich retrospective in Amsterdam. According to her deadpan thesis, the backdating ought not be dismissed as some amusing attempt by a vain, geriatric Malevich to rewrite his career into something more art-historically consistent – a heroic march through Modernist platitudes towards the *Black Square*. No: his far more radical reasoning, she posits, was to radically confound the usual teleology in line with the Suprematist credo to obliterate history altogether. The key clue, according to Bailleux, is the painting's subject: those so-called sisters are not sisters at all, she says, but rather one woman painted on the move; an early visualization of time-lapse faked to appear as if painted two years before Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912).[13]

As the Vilnius plans became more complex, it seemed increasingly necessary to articulate its parts as clearly as possible for an audience. The principal point to get across was the nature of the relationship between the incantatory talk in the courtyard (one night only, at the beginning) and the work on the surrounding walls (which would remain installed for two months). It seemed mandatory to convey the fact that the works essentially 'fell out' of the founding talk.

An uncommonly informative invitation card seemed the most straightforward way to set up the exhibition's 'two sides' – one side announcing the opening of the exhibition on the first of the two consecutive solstice dates, the other announcing the staging of the event on the second. The exhibition side contained detailed captions of 24 works along with thumbnail images grouped chronologically in fours. A consequence of the card's tight squeeze, these chance clusters, later determined the arrangement of the actual works on the walls in the same groups of four.





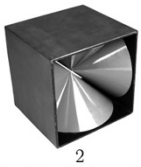
The other, event side contained our attempt at the first 'stanza' of the talk in four verses of 16-syllable lines (without specific stress, which had proved too limiting). This was the first of the four projected narrative parts, due to be interspersed with 16 anecdotal stanzas of the same form and length. And so this dense card was designed to (a) adequately prime an audience before the whole thing opened and (b) give a good idea ofwhat was at least *supposed* to have happened after the event.

[13] The whole idea was developed into: Perrine Bailleux, 'Sisters?', *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #7, 2014.

# SOLSTICE

## OPENING of Work-in-PrOgress, an exhibition of work concerned with exiting regular modes of time arranged by Dexter Sinister


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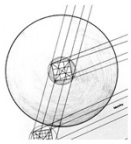

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1. Kazimir Malevich, *Sisters*, 1910, oil on canvas. With thanks to Rūtenė Merkliopaitė and Perrine Bailleux.
2. Bruno Munari, *Tetracono*, 1965, multiple. Each cone spins at a different speed, collectively transforming from green to red over 18 minutes. Private collection.
3. Alighiero e Boetti, *Contatore*, 1967, multiple, edition of 123. Private collection.
4. Giuseppe Penone, *Progetto per Rovesciare i propri occhi (To reverse one's eyes)*, 1970. Documentation of the action by the artist. Photo © Paolo Mussat Sartor. Courtesy Archivio Penone.


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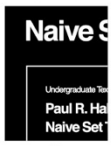

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5. Clock system diagram, Jespersen, J., and Fitz-Randolf, J., *From Sundials to Atomic Clocks*, 1977, silkscreen on wall.
6. Muriel Cooper, *Self-portrait with Polaroid SX-70*, c.1982, video imaged and printed at the Visible Language Workshop, MIT. Courtesy of Mass. College of Art & Design.
7. Stephen Willats, *The World As It Is And The World As It Could Be*, 2006, print on aluminium. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.
8. Kazys Varnelis, *The Last Shot*, 2007–2008, oil on canvas. Courtesy of National Museum of Lithuania.


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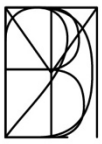
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9. Photograph from the reverse of the instructions inside Ryan Gander's multiple, *Parallel Cards*, 2009 (a standard set of playing cards printed on both sides).
10. Dexter Sinister, *Naive Set Theory*, 2009, proof print.
11. Dexter Sinister, *Watch Scan 1200 dpi*, 2010, postcard.
12. Dexter Sinister after Albrecht Dürer, *Death and the Landsknecht*, 1510, as reproduced on back cover of *Bulletins of The Serving Library* No. 1 (2011).

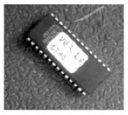

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13. Dexter Sinister, *MTDBT2F glyph*, 2011, composite Risograph print of letters from the typeface Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font.
14. Raimundas Malašauskas, *Photo Finish*, 2011, hologram.
15. Dexter Sinister and Erik Wysocan, Watch Wyoscan 0.5 Hz, 2013, reverse-engineered Casio digital watch by Halmos.
16. Dexter Sinister, advertisement for Watch Wyoscan 0.5 Hz, 2013, digital print. Photograph by Jason Fulford.


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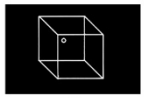


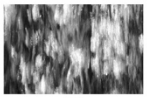
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17. Microchip used to re-program scoreboards at Palasport, Venice, Dexter Sinister's contribution to 'oO/Oo', the Cypriot-Lithuanian pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennial.
18. Dexter Sinister, *Work-in-Progress*, 2013. Installation shot at Palasport, Venice, by Robertas Narkus.
19. Dexter Sinister, *Poster for an Infinite Solstice Event*, 2013, 35 mm slide, light.
20. True Mirror, made by True Mirror Co., 2014.


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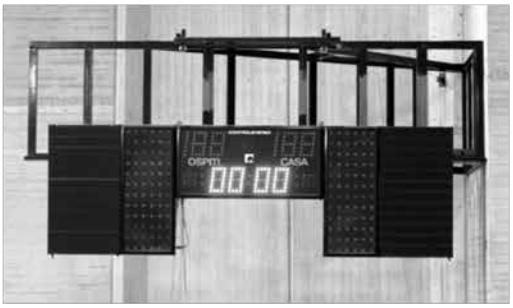
21. Dexter Sinister, poster for *Letter & Spirit*, 2014, silkscreen print.
22. Dexter Sinister, *Letter & Spirit*, 2014, a program that runs a script, 16'06".
23. Angie Keefer, *Fountain*, 2014. Commodity futures indexes, video, transparent holographic screen, motion aftereffect. When markets rise, water falls forward; when markets sink, the fall reverses.
24. Dexter Sinister, *Work-in-Progress*, 2014, a pair of LED clocks programmed to tell the time identical to scoreboards adjusted at Palasport, Venice, one year ago.

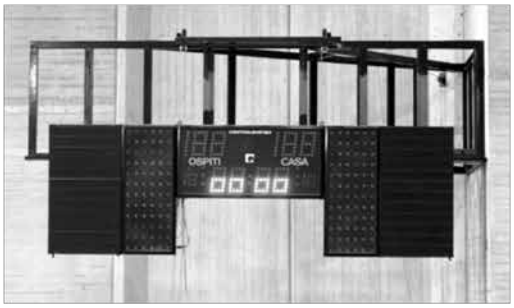
# 20.6

until 17.8.2014

# SOLSTICE

STAGING of Dexter Sinister's The Last ShOt Clock,
a two-sided incantation/talk written to conjure a party
inadvertently missed one year ago




Precisely one year past at the 55th Venice Biennial
As part of the joint Cypriot-Lithuanian pavilion
Which was titled big-O little-o, and equally little-o big-O,
Depending on your point of view (depending on your point of view)

We were asked to participate 'as honorary Lithuanians'
By Raimundas Malašauskas, who assembled the whole show
In the Brutalist Palasport — a monumental sports hall with
A central court for basketball flanked by rows of concrete bleachers.

Our idea was then to hijack the court's two opposing scoreboards
And turn them into dual clocks (though you'd never see both at once).
These clocks would count time not by means of normal decimal numbers,
But using big-Os and small-os, that binary character set.

We sent along instructions to the scoreboard's manufacturer
To burn a microchip that would alter its usual function
And reprogram the system to display this maladjusted time,
Then christened it *Work-in-Progress* — in order to be continued…

Doors open 10:30 pm
Event begins 11 pm SHARP

CAC
Vokiečių 2, Vilnius
www.cac.lt

21.6

XII Baltic Triennial

## 10.4: TIME SIGNATURES

Here's how the script assembled itself, prefaced by a series of notes for future performance:

It starts with a piece of music played extremely loud in the empty courtyard at around 11pm.
The courtyard is approaching darkness, lit only by the moon and the red LEDs of the two clocks hung opposite each other to mimic the scoreboards in the Venice Palasport. The track's refrain: *There's always work* / *In progress* / *You're always in* / *Work in progress*'. It plays on repeat for as long as it takes for an audience to gather. We aim to climax around midnight.

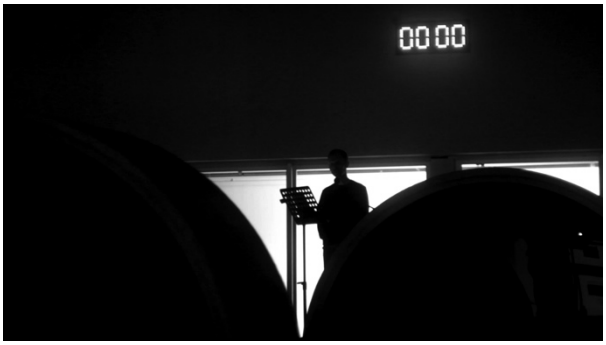
Four more pieces of music punctuate the rest of the hour. Each one is introduced by an improvised (or at least non-scripted) description of the piece, along with the fact that they all employ unorthodox time signatures – they are aural, abstract equivalents to both the stuff hanging on the walls, and the stories about to be recounted.

The two of us each install ourselves below one of the two clocks, then speak from that spot for the duration. The four NARRATIVE parts are read by *both of us* – one immediately after the other, half a line at a time. (e.g. I say: 'Precisely one year past at the'. David repeats it. Then I say: '55th Venice Biennial'. David repeats it, and so on.) This is equally intended to accentuate the meter and make sure nothing gets missed. In the script, the narrative parts are set in 16-line stanzas divided into 4 verses, with line breaks (/) and caesuras (|) to facilitate easier reading based on to the rhythm and repetition.

Although written to the same meter, the 16 ANECDOTAL parts are set in paragraphs, the four verses divided by paragraph marks (¶) without further distinguishing the syllabic lines. The idea is to enunciate these parts according to the ebb and flow of meaning as opposed to the regular pulse of the meter. Each anecdote is a numbered 'point' counting down from 15 to zero (in line with the clocks' reverse hexadecimal sequence), and these are read out along with each part's title. D and S alternately read the parts (as indicated by the letter in parentheses after ech point's heading).

Between these two forms of delivery, one emphasizing structure, the other substance, ideally the audience will apprehend an underlying pattern, without it distracting from what's being spoken;
a sense that the evening is in the grip of a structure, but – as with the clocks – the precise nature of that structure is, for the time being, elusive.

Finally, there are two moments of 'rupture'. The first occurs halfway through (before point 7):
the clocks are stopped while D or S explains the workings of this particular clock system (again semi-improvised, unscripted), then set off again for the second half. The second rupture occurs at the end:
the clocks are halted again while one of us explains the composition of the piece of music about to be played in conclusion. Then they are set off again, now advancing in perfect sync with our 'Theme from The Last ShOt Clock' which plays for the final 17 minutes – until around 00:00.




And so it begins:

[Music: ‘Ya Wanner’ by The Fall, 2005, 05:02, on repeat]

Precisely one year past at the | 55th Venice Biennial /
As part of the double Cyprus | -Lithuania pavilion /
Which was titled big-O small-o | and equally small-o big-O, /
Depending on your point of view | (depending on your point of view). /

We were asked to participate | ‘as honorary Lithuanians’ /
By Raimundas Malašauskas, | who assembled the whole show /
In the Brutalist Palasport | – a monumental sports hall with /
A central court for basketball | flanked by rows of concrete bleachers.

Our idea was then to hijack | the court’s two opposing scoreboards /
And turn them into dual clocks | (though you’d never see both at once). /
These clocks would count time not by means | of normal decimal numbers
But using big-Os and small-os, | that binary character set. /

We sent along instructions | to the scoreboard’s manufacturer /
To burn a microchip that would | alter its usual function /
And reprogram the system to | display this maladjusted time. /
Then we called it ‘Work-in-Progress’ – | in order to be continued … /

POINT 15: PROGRAMMED ART (D)

Just over 50 years ago, the artist Bruno Munari organized an exhibition for Milan firm Olivetti in their brand new Venice showroom, where in place of calculators was an exhibition of art that was produced by programming. ¶ The artworks were much like machines – made with motors, lights and mirrors, moved by a set of instructions which is called the artwork’s ‘program.’ All the work’s possible outcomes are easily calculated, but each particular moment cannot be known ahead of time. ¶ Munari’s own *Tetracono* is a typical example: a black plastic cube with four cones, all painted half-red, half-green; each spins at a different tempo to make a repeating pattern, which moves slowly from green to red on an eighteen minute cycle. ¶ Spin the cones and start the process, the work’s function comes in focus: colour changes before your eyes – as long as you pay attention. And so it serves as a model of the way that the world changes: A sunrise is not a picture, and the sky’s never simply ‘blue.’

POINT 14: THE CLOCK TOWER (S)

A tall building in San Marco in the middle of the city, *Torre dell’Orologio* dates from the 15th century. It was built to broadcast the time to the citizens of Venice so they could share a single clock and agree on what time it is. ¶ This tower has several faces, each with a different sort of clock. At the top sit two bronze figures who strike a bell on the hour. Next, a row of four shifting tiles that turn through minutes and hours (minutes in Arabic numbers and hours in Roman numerals). ¶ Then the largest clock is a ring split into 24 units marked along its rim by letters, each of which stands for an hour. A second ring sitting inside, and moving a bit more slowly, contains signs of the Zodiac that mark out the sun’s position. ¶ Each example tells the same time with a different set of symbols, fixed forms that mark passing moments in many configurations. The way time is represented influences our sense of it – time provides the algorithm, but we must produce its meaning.

POINT 13: VERSION CONTROL (D)

There’s a painting called *The Last Shot*, a large abstract landscape canvas that’s the final piece of work by the artist Kazys Varnelis. It’s a composition in greys, and painted on top of another (not that it’s so unusual for a painting to be repainted). ¶ Over lunch last year in New York, this is how the work was described by the curator to his friend – but they seemed to have their wires crossed. ‘Hey, I know Kazys Varnelis! I thought he was an architect …’. Seems both of them were right (and wrong): there

were two – a father and son. ¶ Neither of them realized this until quite a few hours later, so they carried on discussing this double, composite figure, half-painter and half-architect, a grey area – old and young. An intermediate person; not one Kazys or the other. ¶ It's an everyday instance of the problem of 'version control,' a term from software programming that describes how changes are tracked. It records what happens to forms as they move through generations, a self-portrait of time itself – always the same, always different.

POINT 12: THE SHOT CLOCK (S)

You know the moment in the game: time is running out for your team; a player arcs the basketball from downtown as the buzzer sounds. Hold that image for a minute while we focus on the 'shot clock' – a recent invention that dates from back in the 1950s. ¶ Time used to count *up* as usual, then somebody crunched some numbers to make the game more exciting by adding a tighter deadline; he figured 80 points per game would best hold a crowd's attention, and working backwards deduced that 24 seconds was the key. ¶ In the new game the clock counts *down* from 24 back to zero. Within this small window of time the team in possession must shoot – otherwise they forfeit the ball which goes back to their opponents. Then the stopwatch counter resets, which keeps the game moving forward. ¶ So the shot clock runs a tight loop, resetting over and over, keeping things constantly urgent, in a permanent state of stress. As both metronome and timer, this clock serves a twofold function – on one hand checking duration; on the other, forcing action.

[Music: 'In C' by Terry Riley, 1964, 45:32, excerpt]

In Venice to install our clocks | by plugging that chip in the desk, /
All that showed up on the scoreboards | were random abstractions of dots. /
Seems the chip had been programmed to | run on another control desk /
– Which the caretaker found downstairs | and got working right just-in-time. /

Then, on our way to the party | thrown in the hall the next evening, /
A friend we met insisted that | we'd only be wasting our time … /
The party was already through … | we'd be better off going elsewhere. /
It turned out none of this was true | – too late! we'd missed our own event! /

This sounds like the narrative hinge | on which time travel tends to swing, /
The adventure back to the past | to adjust a temporal loose end, /
That decisive forking moment, | the dark matter, or the portal, /
Which then shuffles the backstory | and influences the present. /

Those clocks were made in advance of | any particular purpose, /
But now we had good reason to | reverse-engineer an idea: /
To somehow get to the party | that we'd accidentally missed, /
By using these altered scoreboards | as a score for incantation. /

POINT 11: LEFT AND RIGHT (S)

A neuroscientist gave a talk a couple of Sundays ago on how we use spatial gestures and metaphors to relate time. Did you realize, for instance, 'On Thursday' is a metaphor? – or that when we point to the past it's invariably on our left – ? ¶ The future, on the other hand, is invariably on our right. The reason why is straightforward: we read and write from left to right – a simple enough idea that we've come to take for granted. So what's been read is left behind while what's to come is right ahead. ¶ The scientist then organized an experiment to learn more by subjecting English speakers to an hour of mirror writing, where letters go the other way (d looks like b, god becomes dog). Our brain adapts quickly to this. It's plastic matter, after all. ¶ When the direction of writing was changed to run the opposite, their feeling of past and present was reversed in just the same way. Can it really be that easy

to redirect the flow of time, writing from the back to the front, ending up at the beginning – !?

POINT 10: THE MODEL AIRPLANE (D)

On a trans-Atlantic Concorde about 1978, the artist got up from his seat and threw a small model airplane made of very light balsa wood right down the center of the aisle, enabling him to say he'd launched the fastest aircraft in the world. ¶ Obviously never recorded and so potentially untrue, the airplane piece disappears when the anecdote's no longer told. In this lighter-than-air idea, the medium is the *rumour*. Sometimes hearsay's all it takes to propel a work into movement. ¶ That model plane in the real one *exits* normal time and space – a bit like being 'outside yourself,' otherwise known as 'ecstatic.' This heightened state in no way means outside of the present moment, but rather totally *in* it – forgetting all past and future. ¶ Orgasm is the classical, most ubiquitous example; another is hysteria – better, hysterical laughter. In which case, we can consider the model airplane's line of flight as a prototype *and* apex of *supernatural levity*.

POINT 9: SUPERPOSITION (S)

The coldest place in the cosmos is in a small computer firm called D-Wave, east of Vancouver, where a chip sits in a freezer. This microchip's at the centre of a new type of computer based not on binary logic but the oddball rules of quantums. ¶ One very weird aspect of which is known as 'superposition.' That's where a system can be in more than one state at the same time; moreover – and even stranger – in two different places at once (famously like Schrödinger's cat, both dead and alive in the box). ¶ Regular computers work with information contained in bits. 'Bits' stands for 'binary digit.' Each bit can be zero or one. But *quantum* computers work with another unit called 'qubit.' It can be one or zero, too, and also *both* values at once. ¶ Qubits in superposition can become what's called 'entangled,' where something that happens to one also happens to the other, so information is tethered across two points in space and time. What happens in the *here* and *now* also affects a *there* and *then*.

POINT 8: POINT AND DURATION (D)

The time now is 4:38, June 11th, 2014. Look at your watch, what does it say? Certainly it can't be the same. These are specific *points* in time – no two can be identical. One 'now' when the words are written, and another when they're spoken. ¶ There's a certain Casio watch with a specially-doctored clock, its insides manipulated to change the display of its face. It still tells conventional time, but each number gets drawn slowly, snaking through the LCD screen from the left to the right hand side. ¶ It's designed so you can fine-tune the *duration* of this cycle to take from one to three seconds (in sync with your own inner clock). The watch is set correctly when it is only *just* legible, so the time reaches the reader at the limit of perception. ¶ In other words, you could say that this watch *takes* time to *tell* the time: a couple of seconds' focus for a single discrete moment. But time is curious that way – at once both point and duration. And time is curious that way – at once both point and duration.

** RUPTURE: CLOCK EXPLANATION **

[Music: 'Clapping Music' by Steve Reich, 1972, 05:20]

To repeat: these clocks at each end | are identically eccentric, /
Re-programmed to behave outside | of our orthodox sense of time. /
Rather than decimal digits | (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and so on) /
Ours are based on a binary: / on or off, or big-O small-o. /

The far left signal stands for eight, | the next for four, then two, then one. /
So all big-Os stand for fifteen | (that's eight plus four plus two plus one) /

And all small-os stand for zero | (that's none plus none plus none plus none)
With all combinations between | to make sixteen units in all. /

[n.b. In the following 'verse', D says the numeral as S simultaneously relates the corresponding pattern, saying 'big' for 'O' and 'small' for 'o', so '(15) big big big big', '(14) big big big small', etc.]

(15) O O O O, (14) O O O o | (13) O O o O, (12) O O o o /
(11) O o O O, (10) O o O o | (9) O o o O, (8) O o o o /
(7) o O O O, (6) o O O o | (5) o O o O, (4) o O o o /
(3) o o O O, (2) o o O o | (1) o o o O, (0) o o o o /

By this point, are you focusing | on the structure or the meaning? /
If anything, it's more meta | the difference between the two. /
It's a bird's-eye view, a gestalt, | part and parcel, one and the same.
And the binary *past* and *present* | can be thought in unison too.

POINT 7: PARALLEL CARDS (D)

A standard pack of playing cards with its hearts, clubs, diamonds and spades. If you look more closely you'll see that it's not that standard at all. We're dealing with parallel sets – an inner and an outer one – of cards printed both front and back; a single deck, two different games. ¶ The joker who made this twin pack said recently that the impulse grew out of fascination with the notion of a 'multiverse.' He imagined endless equal, alternative realities, where each new decision implies infinite courses of action. ¶ He used to want cards with two backs for building up houses of cards (back when he thought the numbers side was purely for decoration). But now he wants cards with two fronts to visualize this multiverse and see what new games might emerge out of this anomalous pack. ¶ A bridge that helps you apprehend two parallel actions at once – your game and its doppelgänger played in a different time and space. What if you frowned in the mirror and your reflection laughed right back, or simply walked off to leave you staring at where you used to be?

POINT 6: THE EIFFEL TOWER (S)

It's not unlike a story from more than a decade ago – David Copperfield live on stage in front of the Eiffel Tower. As the spectacle unfolded, giant curtains were hoisted up, surrounding the whole audience and blocking the Paris skyline. ¶ The magician then pressed on with his captivating performance, declaring at the finale that the Eiffel Tower had vanished. The curtains fell, and, sure enough, the monument had disappeared … then the crowd swung round to find it now towering right behind them. ¶ This illusion had been achieved by means of a moving platform rotating imperceptibly underneath the feet of the crowd. It slowly turned them back to front over the course of the evening, so by the time of the climax they were facing the other way. ¶ This story is a bit too good to check its credibility. For art's sake, it's irrelevant whether sincere or deceitful. An idea need not be *viable*, it just needs ample *energy*. An idea need not be *plausible*, what counts is only that it *moves*.

POINT 5: SUPREMATISM (D)

*Sisters* is a timeless painting made by Kazimir Malevich that shows two ladies on a walk, so similar they could be twins, done in the late 1920s in textbook Impressionist style, but retroactively dated 1910 – 20 years before. ¶ The fake date had everyone fooled 'til the end of the century – proof of a transition in style that never actually happened. Now that we know the actual date, the work is typically dismissed as a vain attempt to backdate consistency and completeness. ¶ But there's another way to see the chief Suprematist's gesture: those near-identical siblings aren't two different people at all, but a single woman shown twice as she moves right to left through time, a primitive time-lapse image (like a nude descending some stairs). ¶ Malevich once wrote everything is infinite and therefore null. Suprematism added up to one big eternal zero. Not 'progressive,' but *out-of-time* – outside normal chronology. Spanner in the cosmic counter, time's gears prevented from turning.

POINT 4: THE JESUS PRAYER (S)

Franny Glass was a New York girl lost in a spiritual crisis, who came across a modest book titled 'The Way of the Pilgrim.' The pilgrim teaches disciples a chant known as The Jesus Prayer – a personal invocation and channel to enlightenment. ¶ How it works is to repeat: Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Jesus Christ have mercy on me. ¶ Said long enough you come to speak the sentence on auto-repeat. Eventually the prayer becomes coordinated with the heart. The chanter chants unconsciously, dissolving any distinction between the meter of the prayer and the rhythm of the heartbeat. ¶ To Franny's mind, the best part is you don't need to believe at all – it's a self-generating loop, a serpent eating its own tail. Between the meter of the prayer and the rhythm of the heartbeat, if repeated often enough, gradually you'll get the message.

[Music: 'Fratres' by Arvo Pärt, 1977, 10:41, excerpt]

Now: the score we've been speaking here | mirrors the logic of the clocks. /
Each line has the same syllables | (up to and including this one), /
Technically called 'octameter' | – eight beats per line, each with two feet. /
And that equals sixteen pulses | … the same rhythm as our shot clocks. /

Among the many types of poems | and variations of technique, /
Octameter is rarely used, | with one infamous exception: /
Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven' | from the early eighteen-forties /
('Once upon a midnight dreary, | while I pondered weak and weary …') /

Poe later noted his reasons | for writing his lines in sixteens /
Came down to how it ebbed and flowed, | its mesmerizing quality. /
He went on to describe its form | as also 'acatalectic' /
Which means to purposefully drop | a beat from the end of a line. /

No surprise that 'catalectic' | shares its root with 'catalepsy'. /
That's a 'seizure' or a 'grasping,' | 'loss of contact with surroundings.' /
In other words, a state of mind | well-primed to meddle the present, /
And transport a willing body | to some former-occurred event. /

POINT 3: CAUSE AND EFFECT (S)

There's this guy who traded options and so knows about the market, and its models used to predict prices, claims and contingencies (by noting all the possible scenarios that might occur and giving every likelihood a probability rating). ¶ But *truly* contingent events are something else altogether – *beyond* predictability, in a space that can't be modeled. A curveball out of nowhere, like the appearance of a black swan – not even in the wildest dreams of possible situations. ¶ The reasons for such an event can only be known in its wake; cause and effect switch places so the effect *produces* its cause. Consequence begs explanation; the narrative's worked out backwards. Less a theory, more a medium, its rules are written in realtime. ¶ The futures market works like this, unpredictable by nature. Traders don't know what they're doing and make it up in the moment. By getting *inside the event* and going along with the flow, the trick is somehow to *twist* time and make room for what's yet to come.

POINT 2: SPELLS (D)

The one thing feared most of all in Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is a simple graphic cipher, black ink on a paper circle – the terrible, dreaded black spot, a threat and a summons to death, the mere sight of which was enough to paralyze its receiver. ¶ The spot's a simple instance of the workings of a

common *spell* – a set of precise instructions, a sequence of words or glyphs, formulated to be invoked by reading, speaking or writing. The whole thing unfolds in your mind beyond the trappings of the world. ¶ Point is, merely the *suggestion* of some other-worldly message is all it takes to instigate a process of transposition … to tune a mind to such a pitch that all it takes is a trigger … to loosen the grip of 'realtime' and set other modes in motion. ¶ The Fear, The Rapture – both achieved via heightened expectation, the nervous system set on edge, and a quickening of the heart. Some kind of chant (or doublespeak) meant to invoke an altered state. Some kind of chant (or doublespeak) to set off a certain *pending*.

POINT 1: TUNING FORKS (S)

Tuning forks produce the purest instance of a specific pitch. Hit the fork and it begins to resonate at a frequency, which depends on the exact length of the pair of parallel prongs (made of some resonant metal – for example, Sheffield blue steel). ¶ Mid-19th century Paris, a machine sits in a workshop: two tuning forks, two small mirrors, a lens, a screen, and a light source. It's all set up to visualize various types of vibrations – like the frequencies of two sounds, each tuned to a different tone. ¶ Let's see how the setup functions. The light is focused through the lens. The beam hits mirrors that are tied onto the two prongs of each fork. When you strike the forks to vibrate, two sine waves appear on the wall, combined in a single figure that looks a bit like a pretzel. ¶ Some look like loops of cosmic string, others look just like plain circles. The shape depends on which two forks are made to resonate at once. Two forks in tune with each other, the same note an octave apart, make for a 'perfect interval' and draw the sign: ∞

POINT 0: TWO INFINITIES (D)

A certain mathematician who theorized sets and limits concluded there are several distinct types of infinity. It runs counter to common sense that they could be different sizes, but consider these two main types of endless series of numbers. ¶ The first kind of infinity is the one you've known since childhood: start at zero, then count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and the sequence goes on forever. The number we can't ever reach is known as 'infinity null'. ¶ The second version, by contrast, doesn't go upwards but *deeper*. Take for starters zero and 1, find the number halfway between; now repeat this process using that new number as the endpoint. Find the midpoint and *its* midpoint … going further and further in. ¶ You'll soon realize there's no end to this process of division. In between any two numbers lies another infinity. And stranger still, this second kind is even larger than the first. There's more space in one of these gaps than any number of numbers.

There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /

There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /

There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
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There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /

There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /
There's more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers. /

** RUPTURE: TUNE EXPLANATION **

[Music: Dexter Sinister, ‘Theme from The Last ShOt Clock’, 2014, 17:00]

## 10.5: MORE DEPTH THAN PROGRESS

As was stated back at the beginning of this thesis, the new bits of writing (like this paragraph) that glues together those already written (like the script above) amount to a kind of compensation, recovering those aspects lost to the original time and place, that elude transcription.

A few last gaps still need to be plugged.

To restate the crux and climax of *The Last ShOt Clock*: there are two types of infinity. One goes up and up – *advancing*. The other goes in and in – *penetrating*. This last stanza ends on the apparently nonsensical claim that the ‘deep’ version of infinity is a greater infinity than the ‘progressive’ one.

This last verse therefore hangs on the implication that this infinity of *depth* is the best vehicle for attending that once-missed party. The stanza ends by extending into a chant, the last line is repeated 16 times: ‘There’s more space in one of these gaps | than any number of numbers /’.

What *can’t* be conveyed in the script (any typographic treatment only confuses the issue) is that these lines are delivered in the form of *a circular round*. This also repels description, but it’s worth a shOt.

D repeats the 16 lines without pause at a steady pace, while S reads the same lines slightly offset with each respective verse – first by a quarter, then by a half, then by three-quarters, then by a full measure. (D speaks the first line, then about ¼ of the way along S starts the same line, and they continue to recite the line offset by this split-second for the first 4 lines. At the start of the 5th line S shifts to begin his lines now ½ along D’s continued reading; at the start of the 9th line, he starts ¾ of the way along; and finally, at the start of the 13th line, he reads a full measure along.) This patterning means S and D read in tandem for three lines, with S speaking a last one alone. (There’s always something that doesn’t quite compute; always another gap.)

The circular round is a preemptive attempt to see what ‘one of these gaps’ sounds like – and so too, how it *feels*. The closing ‘Theme’ then aims at the same, only now using the more plastic matter of music.

So in the second and last rupture, with the clocks momentarily suspended, we explain the philosophy of this composition. It’s another translation of the clock system. This time, the four positions of big and small O’s each translate to a musical note: C, D, E, and F. To guarantee the purest pitch, these notes are sampled from tuning forks, then played over and over according to the pattern of the clocks. Abiding the usual binary, a big O means ‘on’ (the fork hit, the note sounds) and a small o means ‘off’ (silence). So, as the clock displays ‘15’, or O O O O, all the notes are played, C, D, E, F, and left to resonate over each other. Considerably amplified, the pitches collide and generate a miscellany of sine waves. The waves can be felt as well as heard.

Counting backwards (as usual), as the clock displays ‘14’ or O O O o, all notes but the last are played: C, D, E, -, and left to resonate again. However, as tuning forks produce a long sustain, these new notes also resonate over the previous round’s – the ‘14’s over the ‘15’s – and yield even stranger vibrations. And so the theme continues according to this pattern, down through ‘1’ (o o o O), which means only the last note is played (-, -, -, F), and finally ‘0’ (o o o o), meaning a round of silence (-, -, -, -).

And then over again: the whole sequence of 16 cycles 16 times, and this somehow lasts 17 minutes. During which, the sound waves collide in increasingly erratic ways, and the collective ear starts to focus not on the notes themselves, but on what occurs between the notes.

At which point the whole thing appears to end.

# APPENDICES

The Serving Library, ‘Article of Incorporation’
Will Stuart, ‘Publick Notice’
Dexter Sinister, *‘Identity’* script source material

# The Serving Library: ARTICLE OF INCORPORATION

The Serving Library is a cooperatively-built archive that assembles itself by publishing. It will consist of 1. an ambitious public website; 2. a small physical library space; 3. a publishing program which runs through #1 and #2.

## IN OTHER WORDS

Here is a thought-experiment. Imagine yourself in a virtual space surrounded by icons: a claustrophobic negative photo of a woman, apparently underwater; a large asterisk; an open book in a heraldic shield, underscored by the phrase "Lux et Veritas"—Light and Truth; a man blowing what appears to be a handful of feathers but turns out to be a disintegrating book; a curious-looking alien glyph; a familiar optical illusion that looks like another open book projecting first out then in then out again; and an odometer on the brink of changing from 9999999 back to zero.

These are the front pages of a number of Portable Document Formats, and this is www.servinglibrary.org, engine room of The Serving Library. Each PDF is a "Bulletin" containing an article or essay that constitutes part of some overarching theme or themes—in this case, from specific to general: Libraries, Media, and Time. The essay behind the large asterisk, for example, contemplates the possibilities for human communication in light of some extraordinary physical attributes of the Octopus Vulgaris. As it turns out, that "asterisk" is actually *an octopus in plan view.* This and the other PDFs are available for anyone to download for free. Contributions to the latest theme are added from time to time over a six month period, and at the end of the season they are collected together into a single document, printed and published in both Europe and the USA, each in an edition of 1,500, as *Bulletins of The Serving Library*. The PDFs remain available on the website, while a new theme is developed over the next half year.

One copy of *Bulletins of The Serving Library* is bound in hardback leatherette, catalogued, and placed on a shelf in the physical home of The Serving Library. Here it joins past issues, along with twenty issues of its predecessor, the left-field arts journal *Dot Dot Dot*. A neighboring shelf carries a larger collection of older, most frequently referenced books by the circle of contributors to both *Dot Dot Dot* and the *Bulletins*—on art, literature, philosophy, and so on—that maps a far-reaching but still very particular constellation of interests. And on another shelf, is a further assortment of relatively recent titles covering a wide gamut of contemporary publishing that had been sold from—and often published by—Dexter Sinister, a design workshop and bookstore on Manhattan's Lower East Side that was run as a primitive form of The Serving Library by two of its founders from 2006–2011.

The walls that surround these shelves are hung with seventy or so framed artifacts. These are wildly diverse in size and medium, from a huge red wax crayon rubbing of a "Monument to Cooperation" (the original of which is located outside a housing estate, around the corner from Dexter Sinister) to a double portrait of Benjamin Franklin (the classic etching of a smug Postmaster General next to a photo taken of four people checking for evidence of forgery in a giant blow-up of the same portrait on a fake US$100 bill, otherwise known as a North Korean "Superdollar"). Other objects include paintings, lithographs, record covers, faxes, acid blotter artwork, and a ouija board. At some point, each of these items appeared, scanned or photographed, as an illustration in an issue of *Dot Dot Dot* or the *Bulletins*, typically accompanying or triggering a piece of writing. As such, each one has an elaborate backstory. The ouija board, for example, was made by British polymath Paul Elliman while a professor in design at Yale University in the early 2000s. It utilizes a version of the Bauhausler's modular geometrical typeface to render A–Z, 0–9, a "yes" and a "no," laser-cut from a square of the same hardboard Albers used in his famous color paintings. New Bulletins published from The Serving Library suggest new anecdotally-loaded objects to be sought, acquired, framed, and added to the wall.

A resident caretaker presides over these two collections of publications and artifacts. This is a rotating position which turns on the same six-month cycle as the *Bulletins*. His or her duties combine those of a regular librarian—cataloging, maintaining, and updating the collections—with those of an events organizer and editor. The caretaker is a constant presence at The Serving Library, available to open its doors to groups or individuals by appointment, then to supervise and direct their use of its resources. He or she also proposes reconfiguring the collections, drawing out certain books for display—perhaps highlighting an essay in an early *Dot Dot Dot* that explicates one of the artifacts, or juxtaposing some of the older, classic books in order to trace a history of, say, Pragmatic philosophy. Or, equally, reassembling the artifacts—chronologically, for example, or grouped by medium. The caretaker is also involved, to a greater or lesser degree, in the production of the *Bulletins* published during his or her tenure. Ideally, assuming the necessary skills, experience and insight, he or she will guest-edit the season's material, proposing, coercing, and working on contributions.

The caretaker also attends—and attends to—a modest pedagogical program, which takes place in the Library environment during an allotted period every year. It is based on a reconsideration of the traditional Bauhaus Foundation Course, still the default model in contemporary art and design schools. Given that the Bauhaus was set up in direct response to specific cultural conditions almost a hundred years ago, why does it remain the standard today? Through the Library course, this question is considered in relation to the Photoshop toolbox icon—adopted essentially as a surrogate for any contemporary arts software. Working backwards from the fact that such digital "creative suites" constitute the consensus of commercial demand, various guests from different fields will deconstruct the toolbox by isolating a component—pointer, brush, pencil, paint, type, dodge & burn, magic wand, etc., then discussing its analogue past, virtual present, and potential future. These investigations are conducted through seminars and workshops, which draw frequently on the Library's books and artifacts for immediate example and insight. This reconsideration proposes—initially for the sake of argument—that color wheels, circles, triangles and squares and other principles of cross-disciplinary "basic design" are less relevant today than a communal effort to observe and relate contemporary conditions, by practicing the forms of reading, writing, and speaking that facilitate their articulation. In other words, the course will aim to build a critical faculty to comprehend the culture in which art and design operate in advance of (or parallel to) operating in it.

As new component classes are clipped onto the basic "handle" over time, a new metaphorical toolbox is assembled by the Library, which replaces the old foundation with something more fluid, pertinent and reflexive. And this customized, palimpsest set of soft tools-for-thinking is also folded back into The Serving Library's live archive, a pedagogical branch of servinglibrary.org's network that can be followed remotely online, as well as taught in the local space. As aspects of the teaching programs are hardened into new *Bulletins* to be published, which in turn feed back into subsequent teaching, the growing Library automatically charts its own development.

# The Serving Library: ARTICLE OF INCORPORATION

The first libraries were premised on an ARCHIVE model, where important documents were held in restricted strongholds, eventually supplemented by a CIRCULATING model, where resources were pooled for collective use. The ecology described here amounts to a further development, the DISTRIBUTING model, which combines and extends the first two. Publishing and archiving have traditionally existed at opposite ends of the trajectory of knowledge production, but here, in accord with the cheap and easy distribution afforded by an electronic network, they coalesce into a single process. In this way The Serving Library diagrams a reversible, looping principle: it is an archive that publishes and a publisher that archives according to a motto borrowed from the annals of library science: HOSPITIUM AD INFINITUM, or infinite hospitality.

## IN OTHER WORDS

Under Section 402 of the Not-for-Profit Corporation Law.

FIRST: The name of the corporation is: The Serving Library Company, Inc.

SECOND: The corporation is a corporation as defined in subparagraph (a)(5) of Section 102 of the Not-for-Profit Corporation Law and shall be a Type C corporation under Section 201 of the Not-For-Profit Corporation Law. The corporation shall have no members.

THIRD: The purpose or purposes for which the corporation is formed are as follows:

a) To provide a facilitating structure for publishing, archiving, and related activities rooted in the fields of design and art, in direct response to the inflexibility of existing publishing channels;

b) To develop and maintain an extensive online website as a public archive of Portable Document Format (PDF) texts made available for download at www.servinglibrary.org, according to a regular publication schedule;

c) To publish a biannual journal as the *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, which addresses ideas related to publishing;

d) To found and maintain a physical library location with a specialized collection of books comprising a core of knowledge that is specific to the fields of art and design, and to the productively gray area between the two disciplines;

e) To host a design residency program for artists and designers at The Serving Library building for temporary periods in order to use the library facilities to pursue self-directed projects and to participate in developing and teaching workshops;

f) To develop freely distributed informational materials for use by the public, based on the Bauhaus Foundation Course, as reconceived through the standard toolbox of contemporary design software;

g) To provide a physical facility inside The Serving Library building to host visiting groups of students from other art and design programs for workshops led by The Serving Library Company residents, and to stage exhibitions, events, and other public programs;

h) To conduct all lawful activities, which may be related to, or useful in accomplishing, the foregoing purposes.

i) The public objective of the corporation is to enable a diverse community of designers, artists, writers, researchers, and others to address the urgency of contemporary publishing proactively and productively, by providing online, print and physical venues through which the evolving material and social mechanics of contemporary publishing can be considered and affected outside the expectations fostered by the habitual trajectory of commercial publishing and distribution; and by reclaiming the concept of the library—whether online or physically sited—as a space for public use, where resources are pooled to generate and maintain a network of shared information that serves the common interests of a committed community. This objective is pursued broadly and publicly by the corporation to the best of its abilities for the edification of international audiences whose cultural interests span many disciplines.

FOURTH: In furtherance of the foregoing purposes, the Corporation shall have all the general powers enumerated in Section 202 of the Not-For-Profit Corporation Law and such other powers now or hereafter permitted by law for a corporation organized for the foregoing purposes, including the power to solicit grants and contributions for any corporate purpose.

FIFTH: Notwithstanding any other provision of this certificate, the Corporation is organized exclusively for literary purposes, and shall not carry on any activities not permitted to be carried on:

(a) by a corporation exempt from Federal income tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, as it may be amended (the "Code"); or

(b) by a corporation contributions to which are deductible under Section 170(c)(2) of the Code.

SIXTH: The Corporation is not formed for pecuniary profit or for financial gain and no part of its assets, income or profit shall inure to the benefit of, or be distributed to its members, trustees, directors, officers or other private persons, except that the Corporation shall be authorized to be reasonable compensation for services rendered and to make payments and distributions in furtherance of Section 501(c)(3) purposes.

SEVENTH: No substantial part of the activities of the Corporation shall be the carrying on of propaganda, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation, except to the extent permitted by the Code, and the Corporation shall not participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements) any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.

EIGHTH: Nothing herein shall authorize the Corporation to engage in any of the activities mentioned in Section 404(a) through (v) of the Not-For-Profit Corporation Law.

NINTH: The office of the corporation shall be located in the county of New York, State of New York.

TENTH: The names and addresses of the initial directors, each of whom is of full age, are as follows:

a) David Reinfurt, PO Box 1014, New York, NY 10002

b) Stuart Bailey, 272 Grace Drive, S. Pasadena, CA 91030

c) Angie Keefer, 232 Robinson Street, Hudson, NY 12534

ELEVENTH: The Secretary of State is hereby designated as agent of the Corporation upon whom process against it may be served. The address to which the Secretary of State shall mail a copy of any process against the Corporation served upon him is:

The Serving Library Company, Inc., ATTN: David Reinfurt, PO Box 1014, New York, NY 10002

TWELFTH: In the event of dissolution, all of the assets and property of the Corporation remaining after payment of expenses and the satisfaction of all liabilities shall be distributed to organizations which qualify under Section 501(c)(3) of the Code or to the Federal government or State or local governments for a public purpose, subject to the approval of a Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF this certificate has been signed and the statements made herein affirmed as true under the penalties of perjury this 7th day of January, 2011.

*WILL STUART*

# Publick Notice

on the positioning of Michaelangelo Pistoletto's
*Struttura per parlare in piedi* (Structure for talking while standing), 1965–66
from the series *Oggetti in meno* (Minus objects)

*Terms and conditions*

• Order is not determined by *a priori* will but is a combination formed by accident or by a series of accidents.

• The position outlined in this notice is the fruit of contingent need, expressed through negotiations leading up to a contribution to *Stutter*, an exhibition at Tate Modern's Level 2 Gallery from April 23rd to August 16th 2009.

• *Stutter* is a group exhibition curated by Vanessa Desclaux and Nicholas Cullinan, which explores the themes of disruption and discontinuity within processes of thought and language. The list of artists reads: Sven Augustijnen, Anna Barham, Dominique Petitgand, Michael Riedel, Will Stuart and Michelangelo Pistoletto.

• "Pistoletto" is not placed alphabetically after "Petitgand" because Will Stuart have included his *Struttura per parlare in piedi* (hereafter known as '[the] Structure') as part of their contribution. As such, the "and" between Will Stuart and Michaelangelo Pistoletto refers to this situation, rather than to Mr. Pistoletto as one of the artists in the group show.

• TOURETTE'S V (or TV) – the fifth of a series of publications – is Will Stuart's contribution to *Stutter*. TOURETTE'S believe that a lot has been said already, and if we all keep trying to repeat and improve ourselves in new ways, some of the nicest things might get lost in the resulting pile.

• Previous issues of TOURETTE'S demonstrated a recognition of one's own position in the words of others. With TOURETTE'S we acknowledge the repetitive nature of knowledge and language, and stress the importance of privileging other people's voices rather than our own, hosting a conversation between divergent opinions and works from different times and places. Hence the vital present.

• As outlined in *An exchange of letters in advance of TV* in the Spring 2009 issue of *Tate Etc.*, TV is founded on three interests – conversation, directness, and friendship – for reasons that are compressed into the assertion that true conversation is when you don't know what the other person is going to say next. As far as is practical, the intention is to avoid the trappings of a singular event – "you had to be there" – in favour of continuity, i.e., work that happens before, during and after a 'show', and which is determined by the various contingencies encountered on the way. This notice is one example.

• Mr. Pistoletto's Structure was originally brought to our attention by Paul Elliman, who referred to it as 'the leaning post'. From his point of view, the Structure parodies how the didactic art-world / art-historical lens has become the cultural equivalent of a birdwatcher's hide. In contrast, the Structure's imperative is not so focussed, more ambiguous and comparable to casual forms of writing. Such an easy-going nature is potentially subversive, in the same way humour is.

• The Structure is one of the series *Oggetti in meno* (Minus objects). Each individual work in this series is a single word in a discussion which could last a lifetime and which is also a language closed in upon itself. Both the architecture (the material and the discursive space) and the exhibition's curator carry a special responsibility, for both contribute to how the Minus Objects will 'enrol' the spectator. This refers to the way in which the spectator's role will be allotted to him or her by means of this positioning.

• A letter was written to Mr. Pistoletto, asking permission to make a replica of the Structure, on the understanding that transporting the original work from storage in Biella to London could not be covered by the exhibition's budget. The request was dispatched to Mr. Pistoletto by Tate Modern's Kathy Noble, during a visit regarding future loans. Preferring to listen to Miss Noble's account of the letter, Mr. Pistoletto gave his consent for the production of a replica.

• Two intentions were outlined in this letter: (a) to use the replicated Structure as a prop and a metaphor, by 'quoting' the original in the same manner that TOURETTE'S routinely quote existing writing; and (b) to engage in a close reading of it as the basis of an investigation into art, industry, and social re-structuring since the Minus Objects were produced. Both points were in anticipation of a publick conversation with several cultural commentators, whose writings were had been published in other editions of TOURETTE'S. Later it was decided that a conversation between ourselves would be more appropriate, paraphrasing what we already knew we wanted them to say. This conversation will take place in the same space, anchored at the Structure, on Saturday May 2nd, from 12pm onwards.

• Mr. Pistoletto later withdrew his consent, explaining that the work could only be reproduced if ALL the Minus Objects were replicated, rather than just one from the series. However, it then became possible to borrow the original Structure when included with a larger shipment of works for other exhibitions at Tate Modern.

• Mr. Pistoletto's assistant confirmed that – contrary to common opinion – the ambiguity of their status as objects and/or their relationship to an audience was NOT formulated to question the role of the gallery space in particular. He emphasised that the Minus Objects were first shown – deliberately and significantly – in the artist's own studio.

• Where Tate Modern's gallery or public space begins & ends is hard to define, yet an appropriate space to display the Structure might be, say, between galleries, where visitors tend to hang about and talk. Or at least in a position which might diminish a gallery's obvious tendency to impose silence, contemplation and a reading of the Structure 'simply' as sculpture. In other words, to ensure that – without having to read a wall text – the publick implicitly understands the title: *Struttura per parlare in piedi* (Structure for talking while standing); it *is* what it says it is.

• Concern was expressed that the Structure should clearly be identified as a part of *Stutter*, and should be positioned in the immediate vicinity of the Level 2 Gallery. An 'ideal' position was proposed: directly outside the gallery's entrance. From a position *within* the exhibition, the publick could look at the Structure through the glass wall and doors, along with a caption on the glass facing inwards. This caption would be illegible (mirrored) for those *outside* the gallery able to 'use' (lean on) the Structure.

• It was agreed that this 'ideal' position was not the most æsthetic one.

• Upon consultation with Tate Modern's designated authorities, it proved impossible to install the Structure outside of the Level 2 gallery confines, for two reasons: 'indemnity' and 'thoroughfare.'

- 'Indemnity' in that a position outside a gallery space would raise the question of unaccounted insurance against possible accidents involving the work or the publick;
- 'Thoroughfare' being the ideal passage to & from, or in & out of Tate Modern's gallery spaces.

• The vice of considering things only in their fullness – rather than as an incremental series of ever-changing contingencies – draws our attention away from the fact that we can only circulate in the physical channels which are left open to us by objects. In its current position, at the entrance to *Stutter*, the Structure is now in danger of being an obstacle rather than a support, walked around and read as an unwitting icon for the whole show if not downplayed by devices such as this notice, and the large doormat left in place.

• The conversation on Saturday May 2nd will be filmed. The recording will be edited and produced as a series of short TV documentaries, to be broadcast by Tate Modern after the close of the show. Each programme will be prefaced by a lead-in scripted by Paul Elliman. The script for this will be on display in the Level 2 gallery.

• The opinions expressed in this notice are not necessarily those of the authors.

• This notice paraphrases or quotes words previously written by Stuart Bailey, Earle Brown, John Cage, Umberto Eco, Paul Elliman, Pascale Gielen, Will Holder, and Michaelangelo Pistoletto.

• In line with Tate Modern's regular distribution programme, one copy of this Publick Notice will be sent to the British Library. Administration and postage costs would usually be included in the purchase of a publication by other libraries. This is a *free* publication, and cannot be part of this construction. As and when other libraries order other Tate Modern publications, a copy of this Publick Notice will then be sent to them, for deposit, in the same postage. The task of librarians is facilitated using the following information:

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• LINES 3-7 after Wolff Olins, “Tate brand strategy” report, January 19, 2010, PDF, pp. 21-27:

the brand personality is still
always changing
always Tate

and everything Tate does is
OPEN: welcoming and collaborative NOT a citadel
DIVERSE: contemporary and many-voiced NOT predictable
INTERNATIONAL: with art and attitudes beyond the west NOT parochial
ENTREPRENEURIAL: ambitious and inventive NOT bureaucratic
SUSTAINABLE: rigorous and trustworthy NOT faddish

the brand proposition is now
look again
think again
join in

and every experience from Tate is:
EXTRAORDINARY not mundane
EVERYDAY not esoteric
ENJOYABLE not worthy
and ENGAGING not didactic
the underlying purpose grows: democratising access to art by provoking dialogue

tone of voice

Tate explains how to write clearly for everyone > Tate puts forward clear, trusted points of view

Tate inspires how to get audiences excited by art > Tate challenges inspiring, asking, provoking

Tate invites how to let others have their say > Tate lets go allowing dialogue to happen

Tate solid > Tate porous
Tate foreground > Tate background
Tate fixed-size > Tate flexible

17

• LINES 9-11 after Wally Olins, *On Brand* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 239:

Branding, then, is moving into nations, regions and cities. Where else is it going? Well, one of the places to look is the social sector. This is increasingly being described as the Third Sector. It comprises a complex web of organizations principally defined by the fact that they do not exist to make a profit. Museums, orchestras, art galleries, and universities are all part of it. So are charities.

• LINES 13-15 after Wolff Olins, "Museum Next" report, December 2008, PDF, pp. 2-3:

The ideas of 'museum' and 'brand' don't naturally go together. People tend to associate 'museum' with institutional integrity, and 'brand' with commercial exploitation.

In many museums, brand isn't talked about, or only in the marketing department. In our survey, 23% of delegates overall said brand is 'a dirty word – too commercial'. This attitude is particularly marked in the USA and Asia Pacific.

But the picture is changing. 61% of the delegates said the word is 'OK – a useful part of modern life'.

And some museums have very clearly become 'brands': they've captured the public imagination. This is particularly true of big, multi-site institutions with iconic buildings, like Tate and Guggenheim. And our survey confirmed this. Asked to name museum brands they admire, delegates picked five in particular: Tate (55 mentions), MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 mentions), V&A (the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 17 mentions), Louvre (12) and Guggenheim (9). Tate scored highest in every part of the world, even among delegates from the USA.

The way these big brands work varies. One is a brand based on subject matter – MoMA and modernism. A couple have a brand idea that covers a wider range of subject matter with a particular approach or attitude – Tate and V&A. Three of the brands depend on architecture – most people's ideas about Tate, Louvre and Guggenheim are heavily influenced by their mental picture of particular buildings. For all of them, to differing degrees, brand unites a multi-site operation – Guggenheim most famously.

As these big brands have emerged, museum branding has become a live topic. Margot A Wallace's book *Museum Branding* gives a basic primer. Angus Hyland and Emily King's *c/id* gives case studies, with a strong visual bias.

But neither of these books recognises the full potential of branding for museums, beyond marketing and beyond visual identity.

Sometimes doubtfully, sometimes reluctantly, often questioningly, museums have adopted the idea of brand, usually in a limited way. Now they need to fully embrace it.

• LINES 17-26 after Terry Eagleton, "Reading *On Brand*," review of *On Brand* by Wally Olins, *Eye*, No. 53 (2004), http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=116&fid=508:

Branding used to involve stamping your symbol on the flank of some dumb creature, and nowadays involves stamping it across their T-shirts. Wally Olins, a man who one suspects would brand his own kneecaps if there was profit to be squeezed from it, has written a suitably slick account of a supremely shallow phenomenon. Olins is the kind of corporate consultant who believes that rebranding may help solve the problems of Uzbekistan: the problems of this country (which is reputed to boil its enemies alive) is that it doesn't have a sexy enough image. Perhaps boiling people alive simply needs to be rebranded. In this book, which sometimes reads as though it has a marketplace where its mind should be, a relentlessly trivialising practice has found its true chronicler.

Chilling
Trivialising, but not trivial. Olins believes that branding is becoming more vital than both technically and financially based business, and as someone who chirpily reassures that 'when you package it effectively, you can even sell water expensively', he should know. The corporate types he advises are not the sort of people to whom one would entrust the water bottles on a trek across the desert, unless you had a well stuffed wallet. Like many of his tribe, however, he is an odd combination of cynicism and naivety. On the one hand, he churns out chillingly Orwellian injunctions such as 'Train your people to live the brand'; on the other hand he earnestly informs us that car companies are 'product-led', just in case you thought Toyota spends its time marketing its fire drill techniques rather than its motors.

Boneheaded
When Olins tells us that under Napoleon, 'the whole of France was rebranded', he is clearly unaware that this kind of boneheaded comment is usually to be found not in a sleek Thames and Hudson volume, but among a coachload of American tourists who miss seeing the Acropolis flash by their window because they are too busy fiddling with the air-conditioning. In one sense, he is perfectly aware that much of what he is peddling is garbage. Branding, he writes with what is supposed

to be winning candour, is a question of 'persuading, seducing and attempting to manipulate people into buying products and services'. Seducing is certainly the word: most of us have felt thoroughly screwed by the corporations at one time or another. A few pages on, however, we are confidently assured that brands 'are the most significant gifts that commerce has ever made to popular culture'. Olins may regard being manipulated as a gift, but not all of us share this psychological kink.

Bloodless
More than once in this bloodlessly written book, he agrees with the *No Logo* camp that branding is often 'manipulative and misleading', and that their arguments against brands are 'not negotiable'. (The double negative is typical of his wary way with anti-capitalist arguments). Having conceded that much of the practice is indefensible, however, he then proceeds to defend it. 'Global companies', he reminds us, 'do not claim they are in business for philanthropic purposes.' Well, neither do their critics. But that transnational corporations choose profit over people is the problem, not a line of defence. It is rather like arguing that muggers do not claim to be vicars, and so cannot be faulted when they scamper off with your handbag.

Cynical
The trouble is not that Nike is a heavily camouflaged charity, but that professional cynics like Olins regard even charity as a commodity. ('The product that a charity sells is caring for the less fortunate'). 'Greenpeace', he tells us, 'like any other clever brand, stands for a few simple values … all expressed through a powerful visual presence and some pithy soundbites.' Political justice is on a level with junk food. Greenpeace is a brand rather than a campaign, and so are nations ('America is a brand').

Brainwashed
On Brand's view of the world is as nastily dehumanised as a workhouse. 'A cleaner at Banjul airport in Gambia', Olins writes, 'scrapes and saves to buy Nike running shoes as a signal to himself and others that he is able to share at least some of the rich world's glamour and fashion'. There is no hint that he regards this obscene situation as anything but acceptable. Naomi Klein and co., he comments, 'demonise' big corporations for 'grinding the faces of the poor in Third World countries, suborning and subverting the education of children in the West, charging too much and giving too little to customers everywhere, brainwashing people with relatively little money into buying products they don't need and don't really want and that might harm them, and generally acting like bully boys, thugs and profiteers'. After this searing (if grammatically maladroit) indictment, one expects a spot of refutation from a top adviser to Renault and Volkswagen. Astonishingly, it never come up. Unable to address these charges point by point for the best of all reasons (namely, that they are plainly true), Olins resorts instead to some feeble chaff-scattering.

Indefensible
First, he maintains, corporations are in business to make money and not to care for people. In short, he joins the critics rather than beating them. Second, branding is used by non-profit outfits such as charities, nations, sport, literature and theatre as well. It is true that you can probably only produce Shakespeare's *The Tempest* nowadays if you have the sponsorship of Marine Insurance and a well crafted commercial identity. It is just that the disastrously philistine extension of branding into culture and politics is more an argument against it than in its favour. Third, Olins insists, real power lies with the consumer: 'The brand', he writes, 'is controlled by us the customers.' In the end, it is up to us to decide which brand to opt for. Here, in fact, is the kernel of the book's defence of the indefensible – though this, too, turns out to be rather a rotten nut.

Grubby
For one thing, the suggestion that true popular power lies in choosing between Mars Bars and Fry's Chocolate Cream bars suggests a certain decline in the democratic ideal from the days of Thomas Jefferson, not to speak of the Athenian city-state. Freedom now lies in deciding which particular set of grubby little deceptions to resist. A genuinely democratic society would be able to decide not just between Mars and Fry's, but between what resources it wanted to plough into chocolate production and what resources into hospital-building. Olins supports a capitalist order which makes genuinely popular decision-making impossible.

Spineless
He writes pussy-footingly of 'traditionally insensitive oil company' behaviour in places such as Columbia, which must surely rank among the spineless euphemisms of the decade. Most such companies, he remarks with exquisite delicacy, 'have a history which by today's standards of political correctness does not bear very close scrutiny'. He is aware, of course, that not only the champions of PC but any half-humane person would find this history disgraceful; but he does not have the courage to say so, so he hides behind the convenient straw target of political correctness.

Circular
The argument about consumer power is in any case circular. If the customers control the brand, the brand influences the customers to plump for it. For another thing, Olins scuppers his own argument. To defend branding against charges of brainwashing, he has to suggest that it's not nearly as effective as we might suspect. But in order to stay in his line of business, he argues, for example, that in Third World countries a branding programme 'can act as a catalyst for change'. Curiously, what can transform whole nations can't lay a glove on individual freedom of choice.

Contradictory
Olins's whole case works on the assumption that branding works marvellously well, an assumption he also has to deny if he is to avoid looking like an advocate of exploitation. He is in the position of the pornography king who insists that nobody forces you to watch videos of women being sexually humiliated. 'People', he remarks, 'know perfectly well what they are doing.' But so do drug dealers. We don't permit ads urging people to push heroin or kidnap toddlers on the grounds that they can always ignore them.

Impeccably Marxist
What branding exploits is not just people's gullibility, but their poignant, entirely reasonable desire to belong to some form of corporate existence larger than themselves. Since a social order given to greed and self-interest cannot fulfil this role, Krug, Starbucks or Manchester United have to step in instead. In writing about branding, Olins has produced an impeccably Marxist study, quite against his intentions. More or less everything he has to say on the subject goes to confirm what the Marxist tradition has long argued about alienation, reification and the fetishism of commodities. In fact, the only rational explanation for the crassness and callowness of this book is that Olins is a left-wing infiltrator among corporate types, out to discredit them by exposing the logic of the logo with such cruel candour.

Cold-hearted
'Brands', argues Wally Olins in *On Brand*, 'represent identity.' It may be that he himself only knows who he is because of his brand of underpants, but the more discerning among us have not yet been reduced to this tragic condition. To avert any such dreadful fate, the reader would be well advised to give this pile of cold-hearted cynicism a miss and buy Naomi Klein's *No Logo* instead.

• LINES 28-31 after Caroline Donnellan, "Towards Tate Modern: Patronage and Funding," PDF, p. 14:

Wally Olins later wrote that like Andy Warhol was a brand so was the Tate with its sub-brands of Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate St Ives. He identified that the Tate Shop online is also part of the powerful museum gallery brand, along with the Tate magazine. What Olins was proposing was that the consumable brand was fluid – first came the brand then came the product what he proposed was a shift within the realm of the art gallery for its citizens to a market-led brand, the Tate geared towards the modern consumer. Tate's rebranding in a sense began before Wolff Olins was appointed – the embryonic change began as early as the 1970's when it began to develop a different vision.

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• LINES 35-36 after Jay-Z, 2010, quoted in Anthony Elms, "A Flibbertigibbet, a Will-o'-the-wisp, a Clown (Or 10 Reasons Why Graphic Design Is Not the Issue)," *Afterall* No. 27 (Summer 2011), pp. 37-45:

In the digressive cadences of the Dexter Sinister songbook, once called *Dot Dot Dot*, soon the *Bulletins of the Serving Library*, what is demonstrated? Oh, so much reiteration, let rapper Jay-Z answer: 'The danger is that it's just talk; then again, the danger is that it's not. I believe you can speak things into existence.'

• LINES 39-46 after JJ Charlesworth, "Crisis at the ICA: Ekow Eshun's Experiment in Deinstitutionalisation," *Mute* (February 2010), http://www.metamute.org/en/content/crisis_at_the_ica_ekow_eshun_s_experiment_in_deinstitutionalisation:

Eshun is the ICA's own best critic, of course. At the 10 December meeting, he repeated his mantra that 'all multi-arts spaces are re-thinking what they need to do. The post-war modernist presentation of art is no longer relevant and the ICA needs a vision for what this means.'

Eshun's 'vision' has been long in coming. In a 'vision' document circulated in Spring 2009, Eshun wrote that a key challenge for the ICA was how it might 'update the traditional model of the arts centre with its silo-like programming structure.' The new vision was to be one of fluidity, flexibility, spontaneity and itinerant programming, taking its cue from the model of biennials, fairs and festivals, each of which offered 'a more fluid and decentred model of arts presentation with a focus on new commissions.' The ICA could 'occasionally work in a similar spirit, reconfiguring ourselves as a sometime festival, a freeform space of artistic exploration dedicated to articulating a particular mood or movement.'

But what does updating the 'silo-like' programming structure of the arts centre and seeking a 'more fluid and decentred model of arts presentation' actually mean in practice? One might argue that Eshun's antagonism towards the 'post-war modernist art centre' would seem to run contrary to the ICA's 1947 founding charitable objects:

> To promote the education of the community by encouraging the understanding, appreciation and development of the arts generally and particularly of contemporary art as expressed in painting, etching, engraving, drawing, poetry, philosophy, literature, drama, music, opera, ballet, sculpture, architecture, designs, photography, films, radio and television of educational and cultural value.

Of course, a set of artistic designations as antique as these needs periodic updating; nor does it prescribe the form or structure an organisation should take to deliver such a programme. But Eshun's fascination with the temporary, the flexible and the decentred, of a cultural outlook in which nothing is permanent, was translated

into a managerial policy of wearing down the 'silo-like' departmental programming structure of the organisation, at the cost of a loss of curatorial expertise. In October 2008, Eshun decided to abolish the ICA's Live and Media Arts department, a decision which drew acrimonious responses by practitioners in the live and media arts community. And with the resignation of the Talks department in December 2009, increasingly, the responsibility for any original programming fell to exhibitions, the only programming department to have enjoyed any significant budget increase under Eshun's directorship.

There is of course another term to describe the process occurring in this new 'decentred' art centre. It is 'de-skilling'. The vision of a fluid, flexible, temporary institution is, ironically, entirely concomitant with a general trend towards bureaucratisation and the abolition of expertise in organisational structures that mediate between cultural practitioners and arts policy. This has been vividly evident in the changes in arts funding bodies in recent years. For example, the removal of art form-specific advisory panels was an early innovation at Arts Council England under New Labour. A similar process destroyed the British Council's artistic departments in late 2007, when it disbanded its film, drama, dance, literature, design and visual arts departments, amalgamating them into a single 'arts team', organised around bizarre management aphorisms such as 'Progressive Facilitation', 'Market Intelligence Network', 'Knowledge Transfer Function' and 'Modern Pioneer'. In both organisations, the political instinct has been bureaucratic; to withdraw authority and independence from staff appointed for their knowledge of a particular field of artistic practice, in order to better administer whatever policy imperative happens to be coming from central government.

But the hostility of bureaucrats to independent cultural expertise can also be mapped onto the apparently cutting-edge curatorial privileging of flexible, ad hoc programming, and both have the same useful managerial outcomes: fewer staff and more precarious, temporary employment contracts. The disdain for expertise within arts policy thinking also reflects a cynical lack of commitment to the independence of cultural forms, a trivialising indifference to the value those forms have achieved, and an obsession with the mobile tastes of 'the public' as the final arbiter of cultural value. In Eshun's hyperventilating vision document he asks which 'faces should most accurately represent the ICA now?' He concludes:

> It should be the artistic figures that our audience admires ... We should celebrate them in our communications as our heroes, our star names *already*, because our audience believes they are cool. And we should keep in mind that in a week to a year hence, many of those figures will no longer be relevant because there will be a new set or more urgent names to hail. All that matters is now.

With a rate of artistic redundancy as fast as this, you don't need curatorial expertise, or an opinion regarding what art is worth supporting and championing – you just need Simon Cowell.

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Such abdication of curatorial authority to the audience presupposes that what the audience wants is merely what the institution should do. It does not acknowledge that a presenting institution such as the ICA might have a relationship to communities of artistic practice that have distinct cultural and organisational histories, and their own attendant audiences. Such distinctions cannot simply be wished away by a bit of re-imagineering of a cultural mission statement. If the artistic relevance of the ICA has reputedly dwindled during Eshun's tenure, it perhaps has something to do with how an emptied-out model of audience feedback and 'early-adopter' trend-following became a substitute for agenda-setting, or a critical vision of the current state of art and culture, or real artistic-curatorial relationships with different artistic and cultural communities.

This is not an argument against 'cross-disciplinarity', but it is an argument for the fact that 'cross-disciplinarity' requires the reality of a disciplinary base for practice in the first instance. Forms of artistic creativity are not in constant flux or transformation (though they do change historically) but coalesce into sustained practices and communities of artists and audiences. This is not an outdated 'mode' of the 'post-war modernist art centre', but a recognition that a venue may play host to multiple artistic cultures and communities, which it is not wholly instrumental in generating and sustaining. By contrast, the tendency to abolish programming departments rids an organisation of staff with expertise and commitment to particular fields of activity. It is a move which denies the autonomy of different artistic fields as they already exist outside of the institution, and turns the institution's role from that of forum and enabler for those communities, to a regulator of which artistic practice gains visibility. In other words, it reduces the claim that communities of artistic practitioners can make on cultural institutions, and elevates the institution's arbitrary power over artists by distancing itself from already present communities of practice.

• LINES 50-57 after Hala Auji, "In Visible Changes," unpublished document, 2006, p.1:

"If you raise a lot of money, I will give you great, great architecture. But if you raise really a lot of money, I will make the architecture disappear," promised architect Yoshio Taniguchi when he began the revamp of the Museum of Modern Art's building. 450 million dollars later, his koan has become a catchphrase with sticking power long after the completed project's 2004 unveiling. The building's hefty price tag seems to point to invisibility as a new kind of luxury; it's almost as if MoMA can afford not to appear.

• LINES 58-72 after Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2003:

On vacation in Greensboro, Vt., in the summer of 1966, Alfred H. Barr, the Museum of Modern Art's first director, had an epiphany. The museum's official abbreviation – long "MOMA" – would, Barr thought, be better served by a lowercase "o": "MoMA." In letters sent from the city, his colleagues took issue with his holiday musings; "it gives me terrible visual hiccoughs," one wrote.

The hiccoughs apparently took decades to subside. It wasn't until the mid-80's that the museum deemed "MoMA" proper enough for use in member communications, and another decade passed before the acronym appeared on banners outside the museum. Today, the museum recognizes that most people identify it by the word "MoMA" – not just the sound of the acronym, but also its look. "That lowercase 'o' trapped between those two M's creates a unique word-shape that is translinguistic," Ed Pusz, director of the museum's graphic design department says. "It's accessible to people who don't speak the language."

So it's with a sense of great care that the museum's leaders introduce their latest innovation: a redesigned MoMA logo, a newly scrubbed face by which the revered institution will soon present itself to the world on signs, coffee mugs and subway ads, and throughout the Yoshio Taniguchi-designed expansion and renovation planned to open near the end of 2004. As befits a change of such import, the redesign was undertaken with much attention: the museum hired perhaps the world's foremost typographer, paid him in the low five figures and spent eight months scrutinizing every tiny step in the process.

The outcome? Well, it's subtle.

You would have to look rather closely to see it. Extremely closely. In fact, someone could set the old logo and the new logo side by side and stare for some time before detecting even the slightest distinction. The folks who led the exhaustive makeover process couldn't be more pleased.

As might be expected of some of the most visually aware people in the world, those who have worked on the Modern's typefaces have a remarkable history of typographic self-scrutiny. In 1964, the museum replaced its geometric letterforms typical of the Bauhaus and German modernism with Franklin Gothic No. 2, one of the grandest and most familiar of American typefaces. Designed in 1902 by Morris Fuller Benton in Jersey City, Franklin is simultaneously muscular, with an imposing weight, and humanist, with letterforms reminiscent of the strokes of the calligrapher's pen rather than a mechanical compass. "Quite simply, it's a face that's modern with roots," Ivan Chermayeff, the designer who made the selection for the museum, recalled recently. "It has some character, and therefore some warmth about it, and some sense of the hand – i.e., the artist. All of which seemed to me to make a lot of sense for the Museum of Modern Art, which is not only looking to the future but also looking to the past."

Mr. Chermayeff's logic held up. Aside from what Mr. Pusz calls a "blip" around the time the museum's expansion opened in 1984, the museum has used Franklin consistently for nearly 40 years. So when the Modern asked the Toronto-based

designer Bruce Mau to explore a range of possibilities for the new building's signage – including rounder, more symmetrical typefaces – he felt strongly that Franklin should be left alone. "Everybody gets tired of their own voice," Mr. Mau said from his studio in Toronto, "and so they want to change it. But I was like: 'Don't mess with it! It's an extraordinary landmark identity: don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.'"

The museum's director, Glen Lowry, agreed. "We looked at all sorts of options, and said, 'You know, we don't need to go there.' Our self-image hasn't shifted so dramatically that our identity needs to be expressed in an utterly new way. We don't need to go from chintz to stripes."

But Mr. Mau noticed that the Franklin the museum was using didn't seem to him like Franklin at all. Somewhere in the process of its evolution from Benton's original metal type to the readily available digital one it had lost some of its spirit, becoming "a hybrid digital soulless version," in Mr. Pusz's words. Metal type traditionally has slight variations between point sizes, to compensate for the properties of ink and differences in proportion. But digital versions of historic typefaces are often created from metal originals of a single point size – as was the case with the commercially available Franklin. It had been digitized from metal type of a small size, distending the proportions at its larger sizes. Once its defects were recognized, they became glaring: the letters were squat and paunchy, sapping all the elegance out of the white space between them. With some of the signage applications in the new building requiring type four feet tall, the small variations became "hideous," Mr. Pusz said.

The museum approached the pre-eminent typographer Matthew Carter about "refreshing" the typeface. On the Mac in his third-floor walk-up apartment in Cambridge, Mass., Mr. Carter has designed many of the letterforms we swallow daily in unthinking gulps – among them typefaces for *National Geographic*, *Sports Illustrated* and *The Washington Post*, as well as Bell Centennial, used in phone books, and Verdana, the Microsoft screen font. Trained originally as a type founder – the person who forges type from hot metal – Mr. Carter pioneered typography's transition to computer-based desktop publishing in the 1980's when he helped found Bitstream, the first digital type foundry. He was one of the first to embrace the idea that type no longer necessarily began with metal forms and ended as an impression on paper; it could be designed, implemented and read without ever escaping the confines of the computer screen.

Refreshing Franklin was, Mr. Carter said, "like asking an architect to design an exact replica of a building." But it was a job he was happy to do: "That opportunity to really study these letterforms and capture them as faithfully as I could was sort of an education to me."

His task was aided by eight trays of metal type of Franklin Gothic No. 2 that had surfaced not long before in the Modern's basement. Not knowing at the time what he would do with them, Mr. Pusz wheeled the trays one by one on a desk chair down the block to his temporary office on the Avenue of the Americas. Mr. Carter scanned printed samples from the trays, and using a software program called Fontographer,

began the long process of plotting the curve points for each letter – a task requiring the full extent of his long-learned craft. He also had to invent the variety of characters typical of modern fonts that didn't exist in the metal – currency signs and accents, for example. The resulting typeface – two slight variations, actually, one for signage and one for text – are now being tested on mockups by the Modern's graphic design department to see how they look in different sizes and forms, and, after yet more tweaking, will soon be installed on computers across the museum.

But will anyone notice? "I suspect that if we're really successful the public won't really notice the difference, it will just feel right," Mr. Lowry said. Even if this is a carefully calculated exercise in branding, at least it's true (nearly comically so) to the mission of the museum: less MoMA Inc. than a bunch of aesthetes staring at the shape of their own name until their eyes cross. Perhaps in the sharpened interstices of the "m" or the slightly more pinched ellipse of the "o" there might exist a statement of what the Modern wants to be – you just have to squint to see it. "I think that's really at the heart of the institution's premise, which is a deep and profound respect for the past, and an absolute willingness to engage the present – and a recognition that they're not mutually exclusive," Mr. Lowry said.

No, but sometimes they do look pretty similar.

• LINES 75-76 after Richard Hollis, email to Stuart Bailey, March 11, 2011:

It's the quality of the decision-making, not the contorted elaboration of 'research' that define an institution, expressed in its 'image'. (It's difficult to avoid putting words in brackets – they're so slippery in use.) The role of public relations and whole departments …

• LINES 80-84 after Hala Auji, "In Visible Changes," unpublished document, 2006, pp. 1-2:

MoMA Gothic's roughly 0.08" addition, much like the Taniguchi building, represents an exorbitant amount of money, time, decision-making, and collaborative effort. But unlike the revamped architecture, the change in the logo was one that the people behind it didn't really expect the general public to notice. In fact, the museum's director, Glenn D. Lowry stated in the article that "[I]f … we're successful, the public won't … notice the difference. It will 'just feel right.'"

Considering the amount of money (in the low five figures) the creation of MoMA Gothic took to produce invisible, it "just feels right" results, it's hard not to speculate about other unseen strategies the museum might have suggested by such a change. In both examples, MoMA's emphasis on the invisibility of its design is not a case of random labeling. Could it be that with the ubiquity of lowbrow advertising

today, the museum senses a growing disdain in the market towards the visible, and thus chooses the opposite route?

• LINES 86-92 after Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation" [see "Lines 64-77" above]

• LINES 96-110, after Benjamin Thorel, email to David Reinfurt, March 23, 2011:

Most of the time, normal situation, I say Beaubourg, or Pompidou, or Le Centre Pompidou. I tell people I am going to Beaubourg or to the Centre Pompidou; let's meet at Beaubourg, let's meet at Pompidou, let's meet in front of Pompidou, in front of Beaubourg; there's that show at Pompidou; there's this opening at Beaubourg tonight, and so on. Most of the time it doesn't mean the museum as such, but the place, the building or the piazza in front of it.

Sometimes, I use another nickname: Pomps. I guess in English we would write Pomp's. It's rather a private joke, with only a few friends (not from the art world specifically though), which I like. Like: Are you going to Pomp's?

More rarely, and mostly writing text messages and short emails, with lesser friends then, I sometimes say Pompompidou, or Pompompidoupou. Not that I think that Claude Pompidou was as glamourous as Betty Boop, but I really like alliterations.

• LINES 114-128 after The Tate Gallery, *TGMA, Ten Principles for Interpretation for TGMA* (Tate archive: TG 12/7/5/4), 19 March 1998, as quoted in Caroline Donnellan, *Towards Tate Modern: Patronage and Funding*, PDF, pp. 13-14:

Wolf Olins' marketing brief for the new Tate used the word "experience" several times throughout the document. The new Tate vision was to shift away from the former parameters of art spectatorship which was made more user friendly and accessible by the funky new building. The Tate had the flexibility to be re-branded because it was confident of the new market which it had contributed in making. Concerning the museum marketing Olins declared "… more people now visit museums and galleries than attend football matches – the potential for increasing its audience was clearly enormous. The second motivation was to establish a distinct brand appeal through accessibility and a forward thinking approach to art …"

Brian Boylan, the lead man from Wolf Olins was appointed to establish: "Ten principles for interpretation for TGMA [Tate Gallery of Modern Art] – March 1998. 1) TGMA acknowledges that there is not a single chronology of 20th-century

art but many histories, and that every work is capable of multiple readings. 2) TGMA must enable people to be confident about their own feelings towards modern and contemporary art. 3) Visitors' expectations, responses and experiences must be understood and must influence TGMA's policies and practice. 4) TGMA uses the term "interpretation" to include education and information. 5) Interpretation makes an intellectual contribution. 6) Developing exhibitions and displays is a collaborative activity concerned with ideas and communication of those ideas; it acknowledges the positive value of creative tensions involved in this process. 7) Authorship helps to make apparent an art work's multiple readings by highlighting just one, and it helps visitors to engage with art in a more personalised way. 8) TGMA must accommodate a wide spectrum of voices from inside and outside the institution, both artists and non-artists. 9) Interpretation and communications must work in an integrated way. 10) Innovation, experimentation and evaluation are key opportunities for TGMA to pursue, while building on the best practise of the Tate."

• LINE 132 after Robin Kinross, "Conversation with Richard Hollis on Graphic Design History," *Journal of Design History* Vol. 5 No. 1 (1992), p. 80:

RH: Do you think that's true? I haven't talked about this in what I've written so far. And I don't know whether it's going to become the – [*distracted by a radio in the street, looks at the British Telecom vans again, now preparing to move off*] It is incredible: the old van and the new van. You see: there is graphic design moving away, followed by marketing.



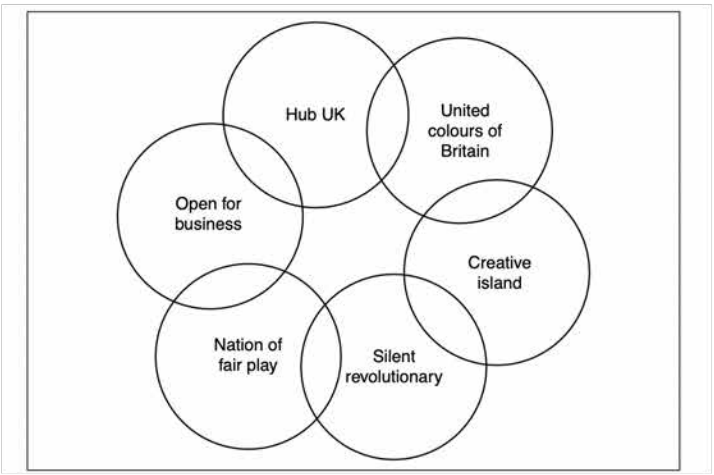

• LINES 136-149 after Nick Relph, "Excerpts from an Unfinished Script," (Press Release), Herald Street, 2010, pp. 1-2:

Under the chairmanship of John Sorrell the Design Council had organized a discussion group featuring various heavy-hitters (Sir David Putnam, Alan Yentob, John Hegarty of advertising agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty) from broadcasting, advertising, design and journalism, the purpose of which was to consider Britain's identity at the end of the century. The findings of the discussion were published in a paper called *New Brand for a New Britain* on the very same day that New Labour won the general election with a huge majority. Shortly afterwards, a report was commissioned to develop some of the ideas put forward in the paper, and to see how they might translate in policy. The job was awarded to Demos, a think-tank with close ties to New Labour and under the direction of Geoff Mulgan, who would eventually become a special advisor to Blair. Titled *Britain™*, the report featured a zingy lime cover by Wolff Olins who themselves had got in on the act, publishing the survey Made in the UK – whose statistics appear throughout the Demos report – and producing a filmed segment that aired on the BBC's *The Money Programme* in which they proposed redesigning the Union Jack.

*Britain™* begins: 'Britain's identity is in flux. Renewed national confidence in the arts, fashion, technology, architecture and design has coincided with the departure from Hong Kong, devolution, further integration with Europe, the imminence of the millennium and Princess Diana's death.' It goes on to detail the degrees of embarrassment 'Britishness' provokes at home and abroad. The general consensus is that it is a country whose few positive attributes are seen to be firmly historical, bound up in the traditions and fixed certainties of the pre-war and immediate post-war era. Abundant with bad food, snobbery and poverty, the UK is held in low regard throughout the world, if it is regarded at all: 'To most people in China or Brazil, and even to many in the United States or Russia, Britain has neither a positive nor a negative image. It simply has no clear image at all.' The domestic self-image is noted for being closer intertwined to its core institutions (monarchy, the Beeb) than other nations and it is therefore more vulnerable to confusion and disillusionment when those institutions betray the public trust or are under threat. […]

The report mentions the arts repeatedly – held as vital in embellishing the national brand with a gentle non-conformity and dynamism, a tasteful tarnish. These various cosmopolitan trills, Leonard suggests, could come together as a chorus in exhibitions and museums housed in airports to greet international visitors. In attack mode, Philip Dodd (then director of the ICA, which hosted a series of preliminary lunches where contributors to the report first discussed some of these ideas) suggested that traveling exhibitions organized by the British Council should stop going 'down old colonial routes ... We should go to Washington and take over the National Gallery there. It is time to think big!' The indistinct word 'arts' actually appears less frequently than its trendy cousin, the even more nebulous 'creativity'. In the ergot of marketing, the term 'creativity' is so useful because it acts as a catchall – it can just as easily be used to describe a new design for a wine rack as

it can a painting. In addition, whereas 'the arts' refers to the tangible manifestations of various practices – the play performed, say – "creativity" can encompass both the production itself (the talents of actors, director, costume design etc) and also the business that surrounds it (the nifty sponsorship deal, promotional copy and so on). In fact the creativity that doesn't directly yield anything, the pure speculative idea, could arguably be said to be the most valuable kind to the entrepreneurial class. By this point in the late 90s with the concept of job security increasingly under threat and the rise of the internet harboring in new systems of access, distribution and gain, the weightless creative thought began to have more and more currency. Creativity in this state was easier to transmit and receive, or co-opt if necessary. It had, to use a financial term, liquidity. Describing the dot in his Primer of Visual Literacy, Donis A. Dondis states that 'When any liquid material is dropped on a surface, it assumes a rounded form, even it does not simulate a perfect dot.' The rounded form, which will come to spread through this text like frogspawn, in this instance materializes toward the end of *Britain*™ as an illustration featuring six overlapping circles, within each a 'story' of which Britain could be proud, 'Creative Britain' among them. It looks nothing less than a new flag.




• LINES 153-156 after Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation" [see "Lines 64-77" above]

• LINES 160-171 after Nick Relph, "Excerpts from an Unfinished Script," (Press Release), Herald Street, 2010, p. 1:

Two of the pillars of Thatcherism were privatization of the public sector and deregulation of the private sector. Government interference was to be kept at a minimum whilst the public, now free as 'individuals' within an open market, were encouraged to use their initiative, to partake in an 'enterprise culture'. Lord Young was one of the chief proponents of enterprise within government and by 1987 had been promoted to Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry. By this point in the 1980s a wave of consumerism had been unleashed and the country was drowning in choice. With everything seemingly for sale, the government had necessarily understood the importance of how things are sold and had initiated a full-blown and unprecedented love affair with advertising and design. The Department of Trade and Industry was central to this development and at the bequest of Lord Young was itself given a makeover by the brand consultancy Wolff Olins. Founded in the mid 60s by Michael Wolff and Wally Olins and whose early work included the branding of the London borough of Camden and the design of the labels for Apple Records, Wolff Olins was one of the first and most successful agencies of its type. Although commonplace today, the methods of extensive research undertaken to build up a kind of portrait of public perception of a corporate client – and to subsequently beautify that picture – were almost unheard of. Because there was no competition at the time, Wolff Olins were on top from the start. For Lord Young, they designed a zippy, lowercase logo that rechristened the department as the DTi. Comprised of ascendant left-to-right diagonals, the logos structural lines echoed the rising stock indices of the time. By the time of this titular shrinkage, the DTi's budget was swelling to nearly £14 million, a more than threefold increase from 6 years prior, and with the DTi acting as conduit a good amount of this government money was being channeled into the Design Council, a non-departmental body historically somewhat ignored by Downing Street but now seen as a vital intermediary between companies and the ever-increasing number of design and brand consultancies. The Design Council obliged with the Funded Consultancy Scheme in which companies were offered 15 days free consultancy on a design project, and in publications and brochures like 'Profit by Design' in which things were really made explicit: 'To put it simply, the design process is a planning exercise to maximize sales and profits.'

• LINES 175-179 after Catherine de Smet, "About One Striped Rectangle: Jean Widmer and the Centre Pompidou Logo," *Design Issues* Vol. 26 No. 1 (Winter 2010) pp. 77-78:

Although the first appearances of the striped emblem were during the Centre's inaugural period, it wasn't yet part of the Centre's visual identity. At the beginning of 1977, it had just been designed and it led an independent, reserved, and confused existence. It was used, for example, in a special issue of *L'Express* devoted to the opening. It was reproduced in various places on its own without any connection to

other elements of the guidelines. […] Indeed, VDA had not yet carried the day, and just a few weeks prior to the opening some people felt that the need for the logo was more pressing than ever. A response wasn't slow in coming—eleven stripes of equal width, stacked one above the other, alternately black and white (or other background color) forming a rectangle crossed by a twelfth band that zigzagged from the lower left to the upper right corner. Thus one of the most successful logos and most striking examples of graphic design in France in the second half of the twentieth century was produced for the sake of compromise by a designer who thought it superfluous.

• LINES 181-200 after Catherine de Smet, "About One Striped Rectangle: Jean Widmer and the Centre Pompidou Logo," *Design Issues* Vol. 26 No. 1 (Winter 2010), p. 76:

The matter of the logo, dismissed by VDA, was nonetheless far from being decided. "Opting for a descriptive logo," claimed the text that VDA submitted for the competition, "would mean fixing Beaubourg in the present moment at the risk of its going out of fashion," whereas the firm's recommended solution would "inscribe Beaubourg in history." In spite of these arguments and the effectiveness of the proposed system that did without a logo, those in charge at EPCB asked Widmer and Hiestand to develop ideas for a possible emblem. In the fall of 1974, VDA presented the results of their recent investigations. Their document (*The 1st Concept of the Trademark Image for the CB*) listed "the possibilities for differentiating among various departments," which included a set of symbols: a triangle for IRCAM, a circle for CCI, a diamond for the library, and a square for the plastic arts, all geometric forms that could fit together to constitute a single figure. VDA's objective, however, as Widmer recalls now, was to convince doubters of the pointlessness of such a system, which would be redundant with the color coding. Their persuasion was eminently successful: symbols were dropped from the plan of action, and VDA began work according to its initial proposal.

"The Centre Beaubourg is neither a bank nor an airport nor a grand hotel," pointed out the document originally sent to the competitors. Even if some details should be refined, they shouldn't be taken "too far." The Centre aimed above all to be "at the service of diverse categories of the public (especially the young) interested in intellectual and artistic pursuits." The signage system and its supports "should be carefully done, precise, and effective" while at the same time appearing "simple and unaffected."

• LINES 204-205 after Gustave Affeulpin [Albert Meister], in Luca Frei, *The so-called utopia of the centre beaubourg – An interpretation* (London: Book Works, 2007), pp. 9-10:

Ten years have passed since the Centre Beaubourg was inaugurated, and still everyone asks me to give my account of an experience which, at best, has been considered a utopia, but more often an attempt to sabotage our culture, a threat to the fundamental values of our society ... Re-reading the newspapers of that time, the sarcasm of the ones on the right and the annoyed scepticism of the ones on the left, remembering the interventions of the parlimentarians, demanding for the orgies and the sacrilege to be stopped, remembering the offended academics and the outraged Parents, remembering the outcry of the bishops and the bitterness of the censors, the put-downs of the grammatologists and of the crumpled etceteras. But don't worry, I do not intend to come back on these subjects and all that has been said and written since, once utopia began to appear less foolish and thinkers started to engage with it anew, analysing it, dissecting it, conceptualising it, lacanising it, demonstrating in short that in fact it was not a true utopia but just nonsense and emptiness.

It is therefore useless to attract attention to such rubbish, to the elaborations against it and for it: it would suffice to go to the library to find everything that has been printed on the subject. Above all, for us beaubourgians, what counts is what is done and lived rather than what is said: things count, not their appearance. Of course, there will always be an Anaxagoras trying to convince us that we have been clever because we have hands, but these people form part of the cohort of epigones, of the prophets of the aftermath.

So, what I would like to describe here is what we have done, with all the details of the actual hurdles that we had to overcome. Isn't that actually what we expect from an account?

• LINES 209-218 after Catherine de Smet, "About One Striped Rectangle: Jean Widmer and the Centre Pompidou Logo," *Design Issues* Vol. 26 No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 74-75:

Among "problems to be resolved," formulated for the sake of the competitors, the EPCB very baldly asked, "Is a logo required for Beaubourg? If not, what would you recommend?" VDA responded very plainly: no logo, no symbol. On this point, the winners didn't differ much from the other competitors, who were almost unanimous on this subject. Although the issue of descriptive signage was the order of the day, converging with the very fashionable trend of "environmental design," logos were in a state of crisis. Just six years after May 1968, logos were thought of as a marketing ploy and viewed as ideologically contemptible, totally at odds with the ambition of a public institution with a cultural mission. Even when it came to the image of companies with business goals, the notion of a trademark was the object of lively criticism. Already in 1967, the American designer Jay Doblin had ironically emphasized that in order to learn to read logos it was necessary to know

at least 3000 different signs – a task as complex, he pointed out, as familiarizing oneself with Chinese ideograms. Doblin, who had formerly worked with Raymond Loewy and co-founded (with Vignelli, Eckerstrom, and Noorda) the design firm Unimark International two years before, knew what he was talking about. Owning up to his own illiteracy in the matter, he then risked the provocative hypothesis of the total uselessness of such symbols. Total wastes of time and money – rumor had invoices rising to $100,000 – they could even be obstacles to the prestige of the enterprises they were meant to enhance. Concluding his iconoclastic diatribe, Doblin suggested abandoning logos to their fatal perversity and adopting typography instead: "A little Helvetica lower case lettering can get the job done." In that spirit, Chermayeff and Geismar had chosen Franklin Gothic for New York's Museum of Modern Art. This American sans serif typeface was designed at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its use in writing the museum's name sufficed to guarantee the museum's visual identity. (The contractions MOMA, and later MoMA, came about only later.) The solution that VDA proposed followed that trend but with a typeface expressly conceived for the Centre.

• LINES 222-224 after Catherine de Smet, "About One Striped Rectangle: Jean Widmer and the Centre Pompidou Logo" [see "Lines 219-228" above]

• LINES 226-234 after "Centre Georges Pompidou," last modified October 5, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centre_Georges_Pompidou

• LINES 238-241 after Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation" [see "Lines 67-81" above]

• LINES 242-253 after James T. Soby, letter to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 1966, MoMA archive:

Dear Helen and Alfred:

Haven't you two characters got anything better to do than spend an entire summer haggling over the problem of whether the abbreviation for the Museum of Modern Art should be written as MOMA or MoMA?

I must say that in this instance I think the lady is right. In all my 85 years in the museum it never occurred to me to [use] a lower-case "o." It may be correct but it gives me terribly visual hiccoughs. I can only conclude that the estimable A.H. Barr is losing his sight and mind in Greensboro—the only prairie town in the

entire lush State of Vermont. I drove through there once and we had a sand storm and I left hastily.

Sincerely,
James t. Soby

• LINES 257-261 after Nick Relph, "Excerpts from an Unfinished Script" [see "Lines 167-178" above]

• LINES 263-266 after Wally Olins, *On Brand* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), pp. 204-5:

The phrase 'corporate identity' seems to have been coined sometime in the 1950s by Walter Margulies, of the pioneering US consultancy Lippincott & Margulies, to describe the activity in which all of the organization's visible manifestations are designed to create a coherent corporate whole associated with a specific theme, attitude or personality. The concept of corporate identity was of course directly descended from the work carried out by the AEG and before that the great nineteenth-century railway companies, but it was presented differently, much more commercially. When he worked for International Harvester and similar huge companies, Margulies took design consultancy right into the corporate heartland. Thanks partly to people like him and also to a changing commercial climate in the 1960s and more particularly in the 1970s and '80s the corporate identity discipline took off around the world, especially in the US, followed closely by Britain. The traditional European-based, designer-led identity programmes with a vague and high-sounding but rather generalized purpose mutated into systems that could help companies to sell themselves and their products. Computer companies, automobile companies, airlines, oil companies and then organizations in financial services began to learn that they could project a clear and differentiated idea of themselves to all of their audiences, from shareholders to customers to staff, by using visual identity systems which demonstrated their sense of purpose or their vision. At first much of this activity was led by designers and architects. Many of the famous names in the field at this time were themselves designers or from a design background. Eliot Noyes in the US, who worked for Mobil and IBM, was a classic high-minded designer. He led IBM away from Queen Anne repro into '60s modern on the basis that modern equipment had to look modern. Fletcher, Forbes and Gill, a design consultancy that mutated into the highly successful Pentagram partnership, is the classic example of this kind of business. As I write, happily it still thrives. But gradually the mood changed.

Partly to cope with the complex requirements of their clients, partly in an effort to learn to speak the same language, and partly because they saw an opportunity

to get closer to their clients on a longer term basis, design consultancies of various kinds and levels of sophistication began to employ marketing people whose background was in commerce and industry rather than design. These new consultants working side by side with designers, were educated at business schools and had MBAs. They couldn't design but they could deal with their clients on entirely equal terms because they came from the same business background. They had the same disciplines and attitudes.

• LINES 268-270 after Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), p. 153

House style and corporate identity in France did not at this time attract as much energy as in America, but Loewy's Paris office had been active since 1953. In 1963 the pharmaceutical firm Roussel-Uclaf adopted a Loewy symbol not unlike that of the Chase Manhattan bank designed by Chermayeff & Geismar. It was composed of three identical parallellograms, arranged symmetrically within an equilateral triangle, leaving a similar equilateral triangle at the centre of the design. Many geometrical images of this kind could be found in a ready-reference book, *Hornung's Handbook of Designs and Devices*. Rationalizing the choice of such symbols became corporate identity practice. Roussel-Uclaf's is typical: 'Incisive, balanced, open, its personality does not represent any particular specialization and allows the group's identity to extend beyond the confines of the pharmeceutical industry.'

• LINES 274-278 after Hala Auji, "In Visible Changes," unpublished document, 2006, p. 8:

"The Modern" became "MoMA" and its first unified visual identity appeared, designed by the then-newly established Chermayeff & Geismar New York-based studio. When hired for the job in 1964, Chermayeff & Geismar who later designed numerous familiar corporate logos, including American Airlines, Xerox and Mobil among others, had been asked to create "a clean and straight forward typographic identity that would reflect the museum's major renovation." The museum's desire for directness and simplicity reflects the Swiss Modernist influences in American design of the time: an aesthetic design language popular for its organizational qualities in its legibility and perceived rationality.

• LINES 280-284 after Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation" [see "Lines 64-77" above]

• LINES 286-289, after "Report to the Museum of Modern Art," November 27, 1963, MoMA archive:

A. *Symbol*
It is obvious to us (and to the Museum) that unless a symbol is truly appropriate to the Museum, it is better not to have one. In investigating possibilities for a symbol, we tried a number of different directions, none of which led to any satisfactory solutions, perhaps because there *is* no one symbol of modern art, or of the diverse activies of the Museum. Therefore we have concluded that it is impossible for the Museum of Modern Art to have a symbol which is meaningful. We also feel that the Museum is in no position to *establish* a symbol, whether meaningful or not.
The amount of exposure in the established communications media in those areas outside the Museum's already captive audience is very limited. In any case it is questionable in our opinion, whether an institution such as the Museum of Modern Art should, under any circumstances, have a symbol.

• LINES 293-295 after Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962; New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 186:

While all these uses of the image have become more important with each decade of the twentieth century, a more abstract kind of image is the peculiar product of our age. Its tyranny is pervasive. An image in this sense is not simply a trademark, a design, a slogan, or an easily remembered picture. It is a studiously crafted personality profile of an individual, institution, corporation, product, or service. It is a value-caricature, shaped in three dimensions, of synthetic materials. Such images in ever increasing numbers have been fabricated and re-inforced by the new techniques of the Graphic Revolution.

• LINES 298-305 after Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962; New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 185-186:

It was by elaborate design that the cumbersome name "International Business Machines Corporation" was made in the public mind into "IBM." This is probably the most expensive and most valuable abbreviation in history. Under the creative direction of Eliot Noyes and a design group consisting of Paul Rand, Charles Eames, and George Nelson, the firm developed its streamlined trademark, to project a "clean, impressive" image. Nowadays a trademark is seldom a simple by-product of other activities. It is not merely the name, initials, or signature of the maker or owner, or a hallmark assigned by a guild. Usually it is produced by specialists.

• LINES 309-311 after Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962; New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 186-187:

When we use the word "image" in this new sense, we plainly confess a distinction between what we see and what is really there, and we express our preferred interest in what is to be seen. Thus an image is a visible public "personality" as distinguished from an inward private "character." "Public" goes with "image" as naturally as with "interest" or "opinion." The overshadowing image, we readily admit, covers up whatever may really be there. By our very use of the term we imply that something can be done to it: the image can always be more or less successfully synthesized, doctored, repaired, refurbished, and improved, quite apart from (though not entirely independent of) the spontaneous original of which the image is a public portrait.

• LINES 315-325 after Josef Albers, description for a Black Mountain College leaflet, 1935, accessed October 11, 2011, see: http://www.bmcproject.org/PUBLICATIONS/1934-35/emblem.htm

• LINES 329-331 after "Tate," last modified October 3, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tate

• LINES 335-337 after "Museum of Modern Art," last modified September 15, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum_of_Modern_Art

• LINES 339-341 after Andrew Blum, "The Modern's Other Renovation" [see "Lines 64-77" above]

• LINES 345-347 after Johannes Itten, 1916, quoted in Frank Whitford, *Bauhaus* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), p. 106:

Itten thought it impossible to consider colour apart from form, and vice versa, since one cannot exist without the other. A short essay which he wrote in 1916 gives the essence of his theory of colour and form.

> The clear geometric form is the one most easily comprehended and its basic elements are the circle, the square and the triangle. Every possible form lies dormant in these formal elements. They are visible to him who sees, invisible to him who does not.

• LINES 347-349 after Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), p. 53:

These developments, from Expressionism towards functionalism and from handcraft towards design for machine production, can be traced in the changing graphic design at the Bauhaus, the famous school of arts and crafts, established in Weimar in 1919. Its first letterhead used the typeface designed by Behrens, Mediäval. The school's first emblem was like a mason's mark, a spread-eagled figure carrying aloft a pyramid. By 1924 this had been replaced by the geometricized profile of a head (adapted from a much earlier design by Oskar Schlemmer, one of the staff), which could be simply reproduced from printer's 'rules' – strips of wood or metal that printed as solid lines.

• LINES 351-362 after Jacques Rancière, "The Surface of Design" in *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 92-93:

In the event, the question might be formulated as follows: what resemblance is there between Stéphane Mallarmé, a French poet writing *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* in 1897, and Peter Behrens, German architect, engineer and designer who, ten years later, was in charge of designing the products, adverts and even buildings of the AEG (*Allegemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft*)? On the face of it, this is a stupid question. Mallarmé is known as the author of poems that became increasingly rare, short and quintessential as his poetic art developed. The latter is generally epitomized by a contrast between two states of language: a crude state that serves for communication, description, instruction, and hence for a use of speech analogous to the circulation of commodities and currency; and an essential state that 'transposes a fact of nature into its virtual vibratory disappearance' so as to reveal the 'pure notion'.

What relationship is there between a poet thus defined and Peter Behrens, an engineer in the service of a major brand producing bulbs, kettles or heaters? Unlike the poet, Behrens is involved in the mass production of utilitarian equipment. And he is also the supporter of a unified, functionalist vision. He wants everything submitted to the same principle of unity, from the construction of workshops to the brand's logogram and advertising. He wants to reduce the objects produced to a certain number of 'typical' forms. What he calls 'imparting style' to his firm's output assumes the application of a single principle to objects and to the icons that offer them to the public: stripping the objects and their images of any decorative prettiness, of anything that answers to the routines of buyers or sellers and their rather silly dreams of luxury and sensual pleasure. Behrens wants to reduce objects and icons to essential forms, geometrical motifs, and streamlined curves. According to this principle, he wants the design of objects to approximate as closely as possible to their function, and the design of the icons that represent them to approximate

as closely as possible to the information they are supposed to provide about those objects.

• LINES 366-368 after Karl Kraus, 1912, quoted in Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (London/New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 14-16:

Loos began his battle with Art Nouveau a decade before "Ornament and Crime." A pointed attack comes in 1900, in the form of an allegorical skit about "a poor little rich man" who commissions an Art Nouveau designer to put "Art in each and every thing":

> Each room formed a symphony of colors, complete in itself. Walls, wall coverings, furniture, and materials were made to harmonize in the most artful ways. Each household item had its own specific place and was integrated with the others in the most wonderful combinations. The architect has forgotten nothing, absolutely nothing. Cigar ashtrays, cutlery, light switches – everything, everything was made by him.

This *Gesamtkunstwerk* does more than combine architecture, art, and craft; it commingles subject and object: "the individuality of the owner was expressed in every ornament, every form, every nail." For the Art Nouveau designer this is perfection: "You are complete!" he exults to the owner. But the owner is not so sure: this completion "taxed [his] brain." Rather than a sanctuary from modern stress, his Art Nouveau interior is another expression of it: "The happy man suddenly felt deeply, deeply unhappy … he was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. *He is complete!*"

For the Art Nouveau designer this completion reunites art and life, and all signs of death are banished. For Loos, on the other hand, this triumphant overcoming of limits is a catastrophic loss of the same – the loss of objective constraints required to define any "future living and striving, developing and desiring." Far from a transcendence of death, this loss of finitude is a death-in-life, as figured in the ultimate trope of indistinction, living "with one's own corpse."

Such is the malaise of "the poor little rich man": rather than a man of qualities, he is a man without them (as another Viennese scourge, the great novelist Robert Musil, would soon put it), for what he lacks, in his very completion, is difference or distinction. In a typically pithy statement of 1912 Kraus would call this lack of distinction, which precludes "all future living and striving," a lack of "running-room":

> Adolf Loos and I – he literally and I linguistically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room [*Spielraum*]. The others, the positive ones [i.e., those who fail to make the

distinction], are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.

Here "those who use the urn as a chamber pot" art Art Nouveau designers who want to infuse art (the urn) into the utilitarian object (the chamber pot). Those who do the reverse are functionalist modernists who want to elevate the utilitarian object into art. (A few years later Marcel Duchamp would trump both sides with his dysfunctional urinal, *Fountain*, presented as art, but that's another story.) For Kraus the two mistakes are symmetrical – both confuse use-value and art-value – and both are perverse inasmuch as both risk a regressive indistinction of things: they fail to see that objective limits are necessary for "the running-room" that allows for the making of a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture. This is why Loos opposes not only the total design of Art Nouveau but also its wanton subjectivism ("individually expressed in every nail"). Neither Loos nor Kraus says anything about a natural "essence" of art, or an absolute "autonomy" of culture; the stake is one of "distinctions" and "running room," of proposed differences and provisional spaces.

• LINES 372-374 after "A coeur de Paris, le 'Centre Beaubourg,'" accessed October 11, http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-architecture-Centre-Pompidou/au_coeur_de_paris/p2.htm

• LINES 378-381 after "The History of Tate at Millbank," accessed October 10, 2011, http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/building/history.htm

• LINES 383-385 after "Search Results: Tate History Stationarys," accessed October 11, 2011, http://www3.tate.org.uk/research/researchservices/archive/showcase/results.jsp?theme=1&object=454

• LINES 387-399 after Dexter Sinister, "We Would Like to Share (Some Notes on a Possible School Badge)," *Notes for an Art School* (Nicosia: Dexter Sinister, 2006), inside back cover; see also http://www.dextersinister.org/library.html?id=15:

Heraldry is a graphic language evolved from around 1130 ad to identify families, states and other social groups. Specific visual forms yield specific meanings, and these forms may be combined in an intricate syntax of meaning and representation. Any heraldic device is described by both a written description and its corresponding graphic form. The set of a priori written instructions is called a Blazon – to give it form is to Emblazon.

In order to ensure that the pictures drawn from the descriptions are accurate and reasonably alike, Blazons follow a strict set of rules and share a unique vocabulary. Objects, such as animals and shapes, are called Charges; colors are renamed, such as Argent for Silver or Or for Gold; and divisions are described in terms such as Dexter ("right" in Latin) and Sinister ("left").

A given heraldic form may be drawn in many alternative ways, all considered equivalent, just as the letter "A" may be printed in a variety of fonts. The shape of a badge, for example, is immaterial and different artists may depict the same Blazon in slightly different ways.

The Blazon is a fixed, abstract literary translation of the open, representational graphic symbol (and vice versa.) Using a limited but precise vocabulary, full descriptions of shields range in complexity, from the relatively simple:

*Azure, a bend Or*

to the relatively complex:

*(Party) per fess, Vert and Gules, a boar's head erased Argent, langued Gules, holding in his mouth the shank- bone of a deer proper, in chief: and in base two wings conjoined in lure reversed Argent. Above the shield is placed an Helm befitting his degree with a Mantling Vert doubled Argent, and on a Wreath of the Liveries is set for Crest a hand proper holding a Celtic cross paleways, Or, and in an Escrol over the same the motto "I'Audace".*

Today, schools, companies and other institutions may obtain officially recognized forms from heraldic authorities, which have the force of a registered trademark. Heraldry might equally be considered part of a personal or institutional heritage, as well as as a manifestation of civic and/or national pride. However, many users of modern heraldic designs do not register with the proper authorities, and some designers do not follow the rules of heraldic design at all.

Bastards.

• LINES 403-405 after George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 67:

Returning now to the place of invention in the history of things, we confront once again the paradox which arose earlier in this discussion. It is the paradox of generalization concerning unique events. Since no two things or events can occupy the same coordinates of space and time, every act differs from its predecessors and its successors. No two things or acts can be accepted as identical. Every act is an invention. Yet the entire organization of thought and language denies this simple affirmation of non-identity. We can grasp the universe only by simplifying it with ideas of identity by classes, types and categories and by rearranging the infinite continuation of non-identical events into a finite system of similitudes. It is in the notion of being that no event ever repeats, but it is in the

nature of thought that we understand events only by the identities we imagine among them.

• LINES 408-424 after "Paris 1882: Edouard Manet Meets Bass Ale," *Wig & Pen*, January 10, 2011, http://wigpen.blogspot.com/2011/01/edouard-manet-meets-bass-ale.html:

Sure, we're the same species as the Homo sapiens depicted in pre-20th century paintings, but who hasn't felt a disconnect when gazing in the art world's rear view mirror – a chasm separating earlier cultures from our own? In that, transformations in material culture deserve much of the credit. Which is one good reason why Edouard Manet's *A Bar at Folies-Bergère*, painted a year before his death in 1883, is exceptional.

Look at the counter of the bar in the above painting. You'll see two bottles of Bass Pale Ale, with their familiar red triangle logo. It's a brand that many of us know first hand. Seeing it in the painting connects us in a wink with late 19th century patrons (many of them perhaps British tourists) at Folies-Bergèrie. All at once, via a commercial logo, we've discovered a bridge over a cultural chasm.

Ironically, many Americans have told me that they've seen the painting but haven't noticed the beer. Some of them are not beer drinkers. Might others who *are*, however, be subject to the *invisible gorilla trap*, i.e., failing to see something in front of their noses, because it defies their expectations?

*A Bar at Folies-Bergère* must also be our longest-running example (albeit inadvertent) of product placement. Marketers at Bass must exult: *127 years of exposure to the brand in galleries and art books – that's a lot of eyeballs!*

• LINES 428-429 after Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962; New York: Vintage, 1992) p. 185:

A trademark (intended to become a standard for judging all products of a certain kind) is a legally protected set of letters, a picture, or a design, identifying a particular product. Because trademarks and many of the other images flooding our experiences are, like most other pseudo-events, expensive to produce, someone always has an interest in disseminating, re-enforcing, and exploiting them. Unlike other standards, they can be owned. To keep them legally valid as trademarks, the owner must constantly reassert his ownership.

• LINES 431-439, after "Gone Fishin'," *The Gentleman's Guide to Cocktail Conversation*, April 20, 2010, http://ggtcc.wordpress.com/category/cocktails:

Should you happen to find yourself at the bar next to one of the interesting types you hoped you might find, order a Bass Ale, if available. As the bartender goes off to get it, casually remark: "You know, normally I resist branding as much as possible, but every time I see Bass, I can't help but want one. It's a bit like the original Lacoste crocodile." Now, if you've managed to catch your neighbor's attention – and we will pretend that you have, you charming fellow you – you'll likely get an exceptionally confused look in return. This should not surprise you. Most casual drinkers, and even some very serious ones, don't know that the Red Triangle which adorns every bottle of Bass Ale is the first trademark ever issued in the UK.

In fact, in 1875, when the Trade Mark Registration Act became law, an employee of the Bass brewing company stood on line all night to make sure that, when the office opened in the morning, the Red Triangle would be the first on the books (closely followed by a Red Diamond for their strong ale). You could point to each time Apple releases a product for something of a modern analogue.

So, if the look you get back is one of open puzzlement, with a touch of curiosity, you should see fit to continue: "Well, the Red Triangle you see on ever Bass bottle is actually the first trademark ever issued in the UK. It was a bit of a status symbol, which even found it's way into a number of works of art. I'd guess that, if rappers had existed back then, they would have extolled the virtues of Bass rather than Cristal or Patron." If you've made it this far and maintained your compatriots attention: well done. Ask her what she's having.

• LINES 443-459 after Philip Thompson & Peter Davenport, *The Dictionary of Visual Language* (London: Bergstrom & Boyle, 1980) p. 110:

General Signs. The circle, square, triangle, CROSS, forked emblem. These are signs which together form the basic plastic language. The circle is the traditional symbol of eternity and the heavens. The square represents the world and denotes order. The triangle is a symbol of generative power and spiritual unity. The CROSS is a combination of active and passive elements. The forked emblem (Y), a medieval symbol for the trinity, is also an emblem for the paths of life. Although these broad interpretations occur in many religions and cultures throughout history, because of their formal simplicity they can be invested with infinite subjective meanings.

• LINES 463-464 after Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1980), pp. 14-15:

Hence, it is not overambitious to detect in the poetics of the "open" work – and even less so the "work in movement" – more or less specific overtones of trends in contemporary scientific thought. For example, it is a critical commonplace to refer to

the spatiotemporal continuum in order to account for the structure of the universe in Joyce's works. Pousseur has offered a tentative definition of his musical work which involves the term "field of possibilities." In fact, this shows that he is prepared to borrow two extremely revealing technical terms from contemporary culture.
The notion of "field" is provided by physics and implies a revised vision of the classic relationship posited between cause and effect as a rigid, one-directional system: now a complex interplay of motive forces is envisaged, a configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure. The notion of "possibility" is a philosophical canon which reflects a widespread tendency in contemporary science; the discarding of a static, syllogistic view of order, and a corresponding devolution of intellectual authority to personal decision, choice, and social context.

• LINES 468-476 after Domenick Ammirati, "Structure, Metaphor, Contemporary Art," *Art Lies* No. 68 (Spring/Summer 2011), cover:

Recently I read Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, from 1991. I'd gotten the sense from talking to my more intellectually conscientious friends that Latour had a lot to say about the current moment, which feels generally transitional; in particular, in art it seems an in-between time descended after the economic collapse, drawing to a close a period dominated in my mind by, on the one hand, salable neoformalist work (however intellectually justified, however imbricated in considerations of process, however good) and, on the other, attempts to (re)vivify political action in art (including the obsession with utopia and the obsession with pedagogy). The book's aim is to find a way beyond the impasse that became clear by the late 1980s / early '90s between obviously faltering modernity and a seemingly dead-end postmodernism. Given the passage of twenty years, one would think we had moved beyond this problem. But in fact the last decade's reinvestigations of modernism in art have merely served to reinscribe its visual lexicon. And I was intrigued to find parallels between Latour's 1991 and our (the art world's) 2011, since the livelier artwork I have seen people making in attempts to move forward recalls to me the late '80s/early '90s, with focuses on technology, the body and their interactions—the fate of personhood overall, in a mediatized age.

Latour seems to love breaking down knowledge into visual formats; *We Have Never Been Modern* features numerous tables and diagrams. While perusing them I realized that some of the centrally important diagrams resembled those in Rosalind Krauss' in ''Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979), produced in her now-canonical attempt to account for the efforts of artists ranging from Sol Lewitt to Robert Smithson who were developing work with new relationships to art and nature. Krauss explicitly cites the source for her diagramming method as the Klein group, common in the "human sciences." Presumably Latour, who is a 'human scientist', is familiar with the Klein group, so familiar as to have incorporated it into his own

methodology. In both Krauss and Latour, the goal is to deconstruct and expand upon a binary, and logically enough, the way to move beyond the pair of binary opposites is to *triangulate*. (The Klein group pursues this triangulate tack to form four triangles, whereas Latour stops at one.) It's obvious when you think about it in terms of simple geometry, and it invokes a baseline metaphor about the development of ideas. Two points in opposition form one axis. To get beyond them one adds a second *dimension*, the simplest structure of which is a triangle.

The methodology of this essay obeys the following geometry: a circle with tangents issuing from every point along its edge where the author adduces a new source. Metaphorically the figure implies motion while, of course, literally remaining static.

• LINES 478 to end by Dexter Sinister

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