

Some Stories Various Questions

One of my favorite museum installations is a small display that can be found in the Henry Ford Museum at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. The installation consists of an oak pedestal and a glass vitrine. The vitrine holds a glass chemistry test tube that is sealed with a cork. Beside it is a small label which states:

It is alleged that Henry Ford asked Thomas A. Edison's son, Charles, to collect an exhaled breath from the lungs of Ford's dying hero and friend. This test tube was found at Ford's Fair Lane mansion, along with Edison's hat and shoes, after Clara Ford's death in 1950.

Edison's last breath?



This modest installation is titled *Edison's Last Breath?*—Not *Edison's Last Breath*, stop, but *Edison's Last Breath*, question mark. As the label says, it is merely “alleged” that Henry Ford asked Edison’s son to collect one final sighing breath from the

lungs of the great American inventor. What is compelling to me 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 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 artificions.

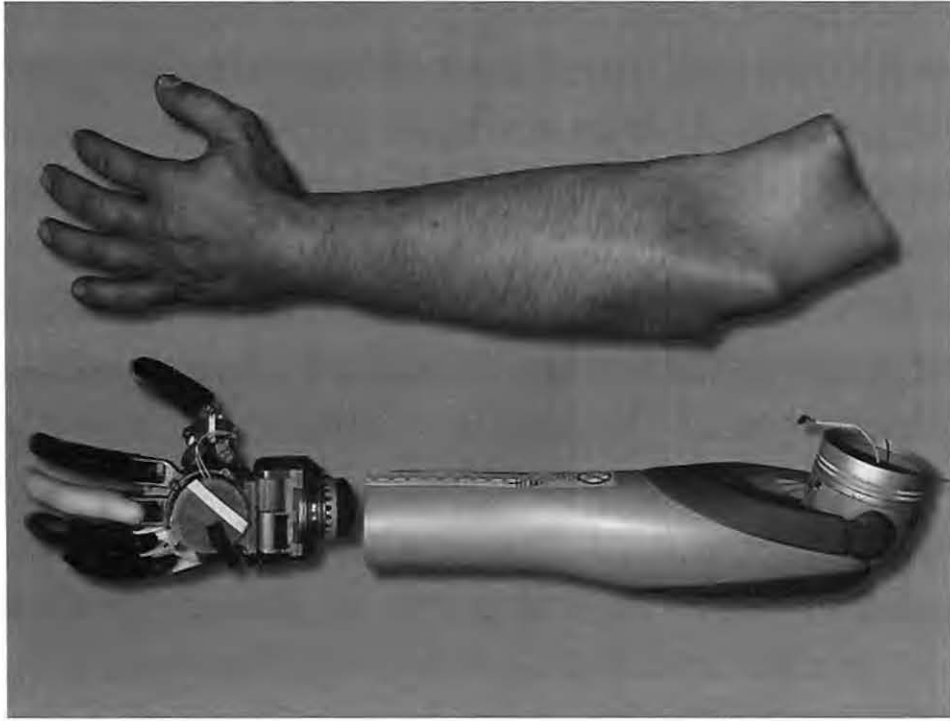
The question is—does it matter? Does it matter how museums narrate, describe, and otherwise footnote the objects they display? Or as Philippe Parreno stated in a recent text-based work: “What do you believe, your eyes or my words?”

This situation is not a new one. It has been discussed previously by literary scholars in the field of textual criticism & bibliography, and is also the premise behind a book I published in the 1990s, *Texualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*. Textual criticism is a literary practice that explores how texts relate to each other, how they derive (or “filiate”) from each other, and how they are disseminated in culture. The discipline especially tries to define the parameters of what constitutes boundaries: where does a poem begin & end? A question like this asks us to consider how the same poem published in different contexts is both materially and ontologically different. We could just as well take the same question and apply it to an artwork: where does an artwork begin & end? Or, where does an exhibition begin & end? Is an exhibition just about the materialization of specific

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works of art, or is it also—and if so, in what ways—about the various conventions that go into the making of exhibitions, which include press releases, announcement cards, checklists, catalogues, and digital-based media?

Conventions like these are representations. We engage in different kinds of representations both because of the implausibility of re-presenting, and also because representation is a means by which we further, through the use of language and images, and through a process that is both otherwise and otherhow, the reach of the real. It is for this reason that the relationship between publication practices and exhibition practices deserves closer scrutiny. Both can be described as modes of dissemination—a process by which the various arts are brought to an audience of readers, viewers, and listeners. I use the critical term “exhibition prosthetics” to describe an array of these conventions, particularly (but not exclusively) in relation to exhibition practices. Perhaps out of habit, we seem decidedly inured to the experience of conventions like these. They are a part of the machinery of exhibiting—we read titles, labels, and catalogues because their authority establishes for the artwork a sense of place. In this respect, moving closer to the artwork involves moving away from the artwork—to look closer at fringes and margins and representations, and ask what seems to me a very fundamental question: to what extent are these various exhibition conventions actually part of the art—and not merely an extension of it?



Darpa Limb Prototype

I want to start with an example of a human prosthesis: an arm. A prosthesis is an attachment, an extension. The OED notes that the first modern usage of the prosthesis as a medical term occurred in 1706; it is defined as, “That part of surgery which consists in supplying deficiencies, as by artificial limbs, teeth, or by other means.” That is, a prosthesis remediates—it fills, it extends, it supplements. But it does not do this without also becoming a part of, not apart from, the body that it fills, extends, and supplements. As the literary critic David Wills wrote: the “prosthesis is inevitably about belonging.”

“Belonging” seems to me the perfect word to describe the complexity of this relationship. The prosthesis originates from a desire to make whole, while acknowledging that the task is an impossible one; that is, that the prosthesis creates some degree of semblance, some degree of verisimilitude, but can never become what has been lost.

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It remains forever displaced in the process of being placed.

Racine St. Building



Not far from my home in Chicago is a building that I think about often. It is located at the corner of Racine and Adams Street. Every morning I walk past it while taking my dog for a walk. For several years, it was what we call a “mixed use” loft building—part business, part residence. (Although, as I write this, the business part is being converted to a Montessori school.) The main entrance is at the front of the building; there is a stairway with six steps that lead to the lift. People who use wheelchairs cannot access the building from this point of entry. They must go around to the side of the building, where a specially designated wheelchair lift has been installed in the car park. This location separates and isolates users from the pedestrian flow of the sidewalk. The lift was installed while the building was being retrofitted. The very process of “retrofitting” reminds us of that change to a building, like change to a text, that involves a process of hyphenation. It is in a situation like this that

Exhibition Prosthetics

the prosthesis is an attachment, and the point of attachment becomes pronounced, awkward, and never quite belongs in the way that we would like it to—the clunky hyphen syndrome.



Deaf Child Area

If buildings are bodies—and I think they are—so too is our social topography. Urban and rural spaces alike have labels that identify, mark, and otherwise caption our experience of this topography. Consider as an example a road sign from Lake Placid, New York, which states: “deaf child area.” Signs like these are not uncommon in the US. Their purpose is to make evident through language and the convention of yellow diamond-shaped hazard signs that which is otherwise not self-evident. One cannot “see” the deafness of a deaf person, and so the prosthesis here operates in a way that simultaneously stands and stands in for that which is absent.

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It could be said that by definition the prosthesis aspires for seamlessness, to incorporate itself into a whole, so that it is indivisible from the whole. Human prostheses are today incredibly elaborate—they work both as a visual and functional surrogate to the original. Sometimes they operate as a fashion “accessory”—as is the case with the new “Immaculate Prosthetic Limb.”



Immaculate Prosthetic Limb

A prosthesis like this could, without any irony whatsoever, be described as sublime. However, they weren't always like this. In the past their role involved functioning as a visual replica as a means to incorporate the body's corporeality. About 30 years ago, I had a deaf classmate named Roger who had one arm, and the other was a passive or “cosmetic” prosthesis. It was my first year of college. I was learning sign language, and Roger was in

my class. On the first day, the teacher tried to teach us to sign "Good morning." So we all said, "Good morning" back to her—except Roger, who signed "good morning" with his right hand only. The teacher was nice; she didn't realize Roger had only one arm, so she said, "it's important to follow my signs carefully, and if I use two hands you must also use two hands." So she did it again, she signed "Good morning." Roger, perplexed, but compelled to make people happy, responded in the only way he could: with his right hand he removed his prosthesis, and then, with one hand holding the other hand, signed back—with a smile—"Good morning."

All three of these examples: the wheelchair lift, the deaf child sign, and Roger involve disability because the prosthesis is historically and etymologically discussed as an extension of the human body. The body is both a reality and a metaphor—a metaphor for other bodies. Books are bodies, exhibitions are bodies, buildings are bodies—what is it that makes a body "complete"? What makes a body of an exhibition "whole"?

In Mieke Bal's book *Double Exposures*, she explains, "The discourse around which museums exist, and which defines their primary function, is exposition" (*Double Exposures*, 2). Exposition involves the doubling of both showing and telling. Which is what I am doing right now: showing and telling about the practice of showing and telling.

And so it would seem that the relationship between a body and its prosthesis is a dialogic relationship, each "informing" the other, each

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supplementing the other. The French critic Gerard Genette has spoken of verbal appendages, such as titles and captions, as *paratexts*: that which is alongside the main text. But alongside is not enough; there is movement between the body and its extensions, a movement that is peritextual in design, a movement that involves the peregrinations of a shifting ground.

What I find particularly engaging about *Edison's Last Breath?* is how the label is contained within the vitrine, neatly positioned beside the test tube containing perhaps Edison's last breath. Like Piero Manzoni's famous cans of *Merda d'artista*, it is not the contents of the test tube or the can that matter as much as how they are labeled, because we construct meaning on the basis of our beliefs about those labels.



Retrace Your Steps exhibition catalog, curated
by Hans Ulrich Obrist at Sir John Soane's Museum

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This in turn makes a museum like Sir John Soane's Museum so compelling: Soane's Museum has no labels on the walls, which is precisely as Soane intended. Instead of labels, Soane prepared three guidebooks for the museum, and the guidebooks modulate the movement of visitors to the museum.

This *modus operandi* continued in the exhibition Hans Ulrich Obrist curated at Soane's Museum in 1999. The exhibition consisted of work by a number of contemporary artists, among them Cerith Wyn Evans, Steve McQueen, and Douglas Gordon. Rather than labeling the art, Cerith initiated the design of a foldout brochure that operated like Soane's guidebooks—a supplement to the exhibition that was also part of the exhibition.

Among archivists, checklists and similar printed materials are described as “ephemera.” The word derives from the Greek *ephemeron* meaning that which lasts very briefly. One could argue that ephemera consist of the incarnation of the ephemeral—it is the sort of unexceptional everyday stuff that typically gets thrown away. Yet, while exhibitions themselves are temporal—a typical gallery show last four weeks—it is the ephemera that outlive and outlast the exhibition. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, ephemera are not catalogued like books, but rather are compressed into vertical files—folders organized by artist. These vertical files/artist files are labeled: “The folder may include announcements, clippings, press releases, brochures, reviews, invitations, small exhibition catalogs, and other ephemeral material.” This material is important in

terms of how we read art—how we work our way to it and through it. This subject has not escaped the notice of critical and curatorial scrutiny.

In 1993 the Cleveland Museum of Art published *The Visitor's Voice: Visitor Studies in the Renaissance-Baroque Galleries of the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1990-1993*. It might sound like an arcane publication—it is—but it is also a very minute study of how museum visitors respond to the specific ways visual information is presented in the form of wall labels, brochures, and interpretative texts. In the case of wall labels, the study explored variation in content, writing style, length, fonts, and placement. In 1994 Trevor Fairbrother curated an exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Art called “The Label Show: Contemporary Art and the Museum.” It was an engaging show; works that normally had one label had two or more, and the labels were also signed by the individuals who wrote them—a very important contrast to the ways museums typically aspire to present themselves as disinterested authorities.

A very intriguing study could likewise be made of titles and press releases. Sometimes they quote an exhibition; sometimes they counterpoint an exhibition; sometimes they are the exhibition itself—or a part of it. Félix González-Torres (in his press release for “Untitled (Vultures)” at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1995) and Seth Price (in his press release for “Grey Flags” at Alogon Gallery in Chicago in 2008) created press material that was fundamentally as much art as anything else in

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES

Untitled (Vultures) 1995

September 8 - October 14

"Our role as artist is more controversial now because there are those, claiming the absolute authority of religion, who detest much of our work as much as they detest most of our politics. Instead of rationally debating subjects like abortion or gay rights, they condemn as immoral those who favor choices and tolerance. They disown their own dark side and magnify everyone else's until, at the extreme, doctors are murdered in the name of protecting life. I wonder, who is this God they invoke, who is so petty and mean? Is God really against gun control and food stamps for poor children?"

*excerpt from "The Artist as Citizen" by Barbra Streisand
delivered February 3, 1995 at John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.*

"Behold the son of God! Coward! And if the cold
Heels of the divine feet trampled on my shoulders,
I'd call you coward still! That fly-specked forehead!
Socrates, Jesus: righteous both! Stupid Saviors!
Respect me, Accursed forever in nights of blood!

"Oh make him go away, with his tonsils tied
Tightly in a scarf of shame, sweet as sugar
On a rotten tooth, sucking my boredom, satisfied-
Like a bitch who's just been jumped by horny doggies
Licks a piece of entrail dangling from her side.

"Forget your filthy charities, you hypocrite;
I hate the look in your runny rag-doll eyes!
Whining for papa like a snot-nosed kid,
An idiot waiting for music from on high!
Savior, your statuary gut is full of shit!"..

*Excerpt from
"The Savior Bumped Upon His Heavy Butt"
Arthur Rimbaud
from his book A Season in Hell
c. 1871*

I work all day like a monk
and at night wander about like an alleycat
looking for love...I'll propose
to the Church that I be made a saint.
In fact I respond to mystification
with mildness. I watch the lynch-mob
as through a camera-eye.
With the calm courage of a scientist,
I watch myself being massacred.
I seem to feel hate and yet I write
verses full of painstaking love.
I study treachery as a fatal phenomenon,
almost as if I were not its object.
I pity the young fascists,
and the old ones, whom I consider forms
of the most horrible evil, I oppose
only with the violence of reason.
Passive as a bird that sees all, in flight,
and carries in its heart,
rising in the sky,
an unforgiving conscience.

*"I Work All Day"
Pier Paolo Pasolini
1964*

the exhibition. Price, in particular, intended it this way, just as Douglas Gordon once contributed the title of an exhibition as a contribution to the exhibition. ["Retrace Your Steps: Remember Tomorrow," Sir John Soane's Museum, 1999]. Art historians typically speak of provenance as a form of ownership. However, ownership is also about the authority, and the authority of titles, captions, and so on is in turn a part of the provenance of the work. Fairbrother's "Label Show" tried to draw out this subject, but his was a singular, if not an iconoclastic effort. I am surprised at times when critics and historians fail to acknowledge the instability of titles and captions, and how these changed and changing states reflect the ways that works of art are unmade, remade, and made over in the course of their transmission as cultural objects. Jackson Pollock's titles, for example, were frequently re-titled by his critics and collectors. *Number 9* became *Summertime*; *Number 1, 1950* became *Lavender Mist*; *Number 11, 1952* became *Blue Poles*; *Number 30, 1950* became *Autumn Rhythm*. This is all very important because we don't often consider the extent to which artists are also authors of their own press releases, announcement cards, and catalogues. "Authorship" is typically an imbricated process of overlapping authority; it is rarely, in the matter of exhibition ephemera, simple or simplistic.

Starting in the early 1990s, a body of work has developed around the prosthesis. For a show at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark in 1997, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska composed and published an "errata" to the exhibition

catalogue that explores the relationship between everyday objects and art objects. It was only a few years earlier that Félix González-Torres created his singular and well-known poster projects. It is important to put this in the context of the early 1990s. The stock market crash of 1987 ended the megalomania of the 1980s and redirected aesthetic practices towards something much more modest in scale. And not all of these projects involved a physical materialization of a printed object: some were performative, such as Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights* (1989) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which involved turning the gallery docent tour into a reflexively critical performance. Fraser's work was a prelude to the manifestation of art as a form of institutional critique that developed in the early 1990s in work by Mark Dion, Fred Wilson, and Renee Green, among others—a subject pursued in the exhibition “What Happened to the Institutional Critique” at American Fine Arts in New York in the fall of 1993. Laurie Parsons did a relevant project at the New Museum in 1992, which, like Fraser's performance, used certain immaterial exhibition conventions in a new way. *The New Museum Annual Report, 1992–1994* describes Parsons' project in the following way:

“As her contribution to the exhibition [‘The Spatial Drive’], artist Laurie Parsons developed the Security and Admissions Project, in which all printed materials were removed from the gallery and information was given verbally instead by the Museum’s security

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guards and admissions staff. The project facilitated dialogue between visitors and staff focusing on the interpersonal and social dimensions of the museum experience and the open-ended nature of interpretation.”

One of the most compelling and lesser-known examples of prosthetic art that I have encountered took place during Documenta in Kassel, Germany in 1997. It was called *Novaphorm Hotel*. The project was conceived by the German artists Lisa Junghanss and Martin Eder. The hotel itself was essentially a Bed & Breakfast that the two artists operated as an unofficial part of Documenta. Junghanss and Eder rented two flats in Kassel, renovated them, and advertised their availability through the official Documenta Visitor's Services. Operating in the ambiguous territory of quasi-official spaces, *Novaphorm Hotel* was “disseminated” among the public by way of various publications related to hotel culture: postcards, door hangers, business cards, and registration cards.

The publications were designed by a collaborator, Peter Hankel. The pharmaceutical packaging has a distinct, if not allusive purpose; the omnipresent motto of *Novaphorm* is “wirkt zur gegewart” — it “affects the present.” It affects the present because *Novaphorm* is essentially an exploration of the relationship between individuals and social spaces, and how a certain social situation will affect bodies moving through it. Like a body under the influence of bio- and psychopharmaceuticals, the body is not itself: it defines itself in relation to exterior circumstances that ultimately construct it.

Novaphorm Hotel, like other collaborations between Junghanss and Eder, was an installation that was also a performance project where the artists, as part of a social and monetary transaction, served their guests by creating a “relaxation space”: the breakfasts were sumptuous, and both Junghanss and Eder were around to talk with their guests, and guests were around to talk with other guests — at nine in the morning over coffee or two in the morning over beer. *Novaphorm Hotel* had a very modest goal of occupying a distinct social space between art and life that is in the end both art and life.

It was during the same decade that Hans Ulrich Obrist started organizing projects that redefined the parameters of place by taking the exhibition outside the gallery and the museum. His first exhibition, entitled “The Kitchen Show,” took place in 1991 in the kitchen of his apartment in St. Gallen. In the catalogue, Hans Ulrich explained: “[The]

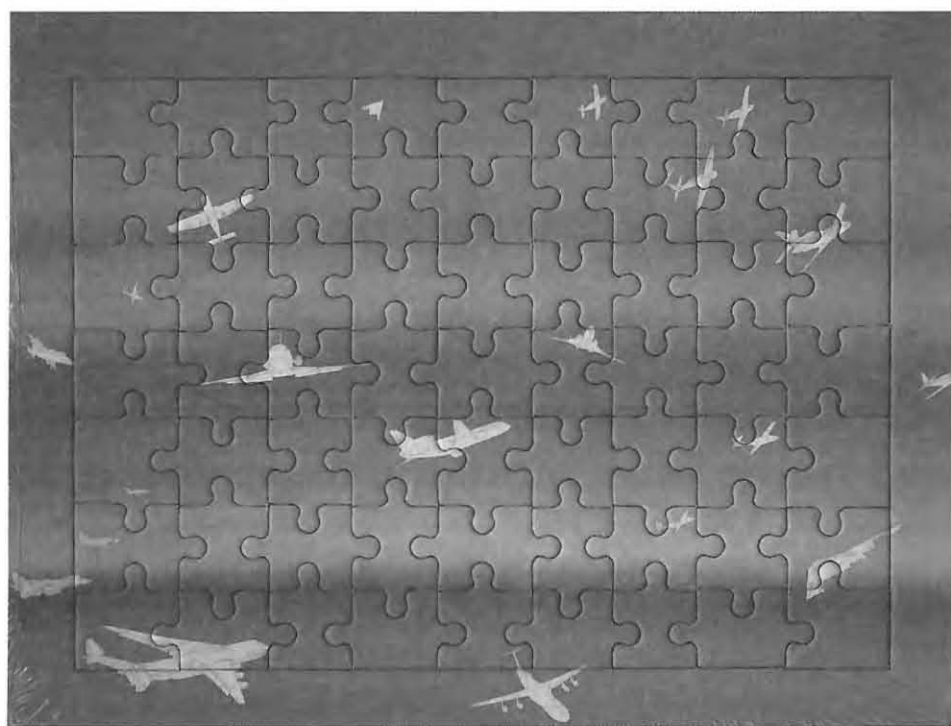
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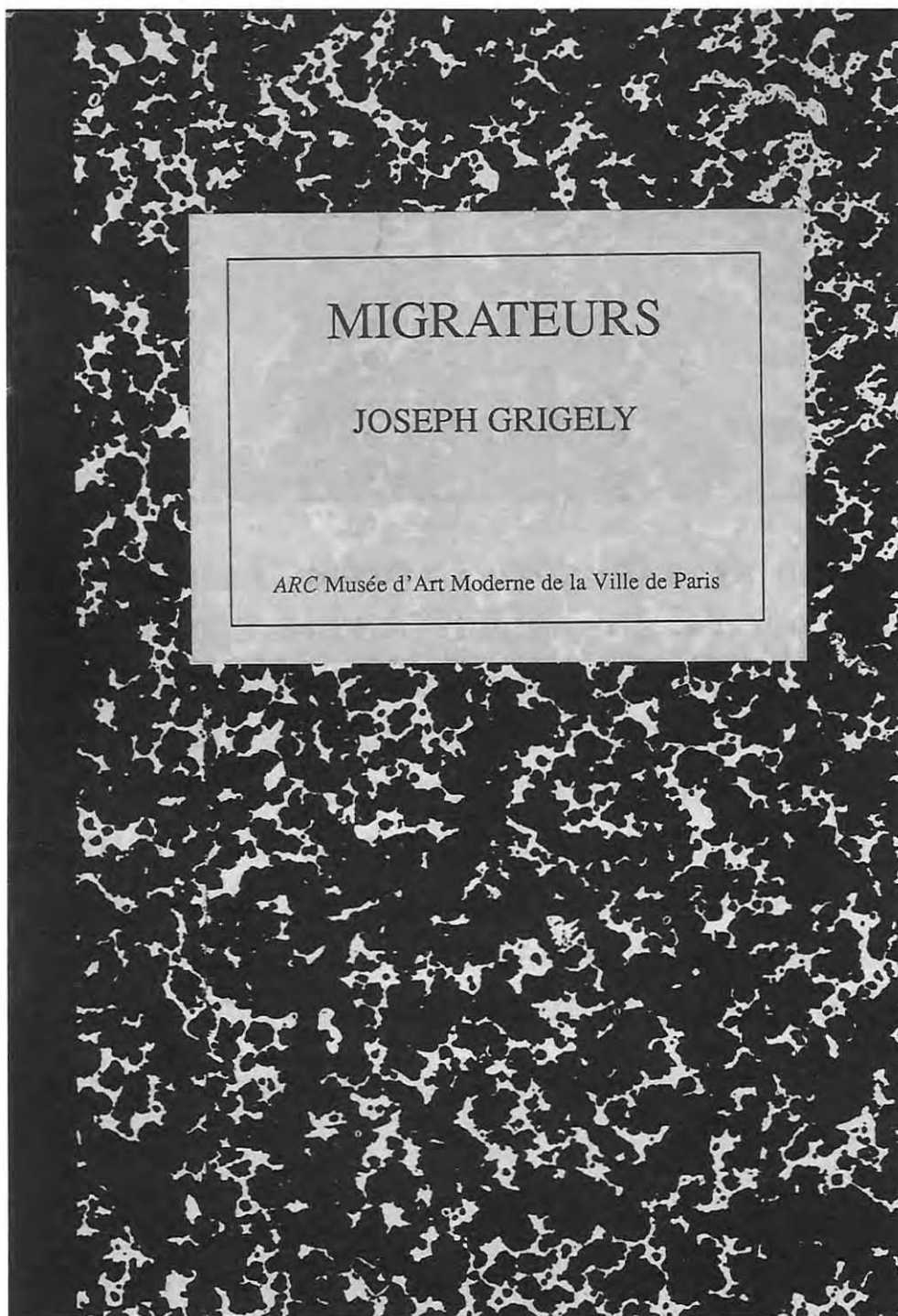
Amy & Hans Ulrich Obrist



starting point is the idea to present an exhibition in an unspectacular space.” As his curatorial oeuvre grew, so did the definition of what constituted an unspectacular space. In projects he did with the museum in progress in Vienna, he turned the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard* into a museum through a series of interventions: artists were invited to create projects that were published as part of the regular editorial content of the paper.

Alighiero Boetti puzzle, 1992





Migrateurs cover

In collaboration with Alighiero Boetti, he curated a project of Boetti's paintings of airplanes that appeared in the inflight magazine of Austrian Airlines in 1992, and the images were also made into jigsaw puzzles that were given to children. A related project is "Point d'ironie," a hybrid poster/exhibition, which began in 1997 with the support

of agnès b.: an artist is given free reign to design each project. A hundred thousand copies are produced and distributed free in museums, cafes, schools, cinemas, and related venues. Projects like “Point d’ironie” work in a way that realigns the conventions by which art is disseminated. Such realignment was the *modus operandi* of the “Migrateurs” exhibitions Hans Ulrich curated at the Musée d’art moderne in Paris, where artists were invited to use a variety of public locations in the museum—the bookshop and the café among them—for installations. In addition, each exhibition was accompanied by a low-cost catalogue that, rather than reiterating or quoting the exhibition, functioned to inflect the exhibition. In this regard, Hans Ulrich’s legacy from the 1990s was to remake curatorial practice a form of institutional criticism.

Hans Ulrich also created situations and opportunities for artists to de- and re-materialize their work in new situations outside of the museum—and to do so as a mainstream way of working. His book *Delta X: Der Kurator als Katalysator*, which was published in 1996, provides a microhistory of the emergence of this practice. I count myself among the many artists who benefited from the initial experience of working with Hans Ulrich.

Since 1994 my work has explored the disjunction between visual and auditory experience. This body of work is inflected by my deafness—I am totally deaf, and have been since I was ten years old. It’s not the deafness that is important, so much as the implications of it, and the way it realigns the sensory world. What does the world look like with the sound turned

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off? How might it be that language can be said to caption human experience? Painters like Hogarth, Gainsborough, and Canaletto frequently painted people engaged in some kind of conversational discourse, but the inhabitants of those paintings, for all that they say, say nothing at all.

A recent project, involving photographs of people singing from the *New York Times*, is called "Songs Without Words". I removed the captions from the photographs, and then reprinted them as a series of captionless, voiceless images. It is a simple gesture; a process of making that involves unmaking. Exhibitions sometimes have a bad habit of saying too much, and the labels and captions and wall texts that characterize contemporary exhibition practices have a way of doing exactly this. It was Susan Sontag who told us that every photograph wants a caption. While this may be true in the case of certain photographic genres and traditions, generally speaking, it is not true of images, where a caption works in a way that narrates, even chaperones, the image.

There's another way of removing captions from images. All you have to do is turn off the sound on your TV. I first outlined this project while working with Hans Ulrich on his "do it" exhibition—the home version: Watch the news without sound. Watch a concert without sound. Watch a sitcom without sound. At first it seems contrived and awkward, but after a while, the contrivance and awkwardness start to get interesting because they remind us just how ambiguous the body is when it doesn't have words to sustain it. This ambiguity is semantically

liberating. The photographs of people singing in the *New York Times* also have this way of reminding us that visual representations are not just about the visual field, but about the auditory field as well.

Many of my conversations with hearing people are inscribed on paper, and it is by using papers like these that I construct wall pieces and installations. This has been an ongoing subject of my work for the past fifteen years.

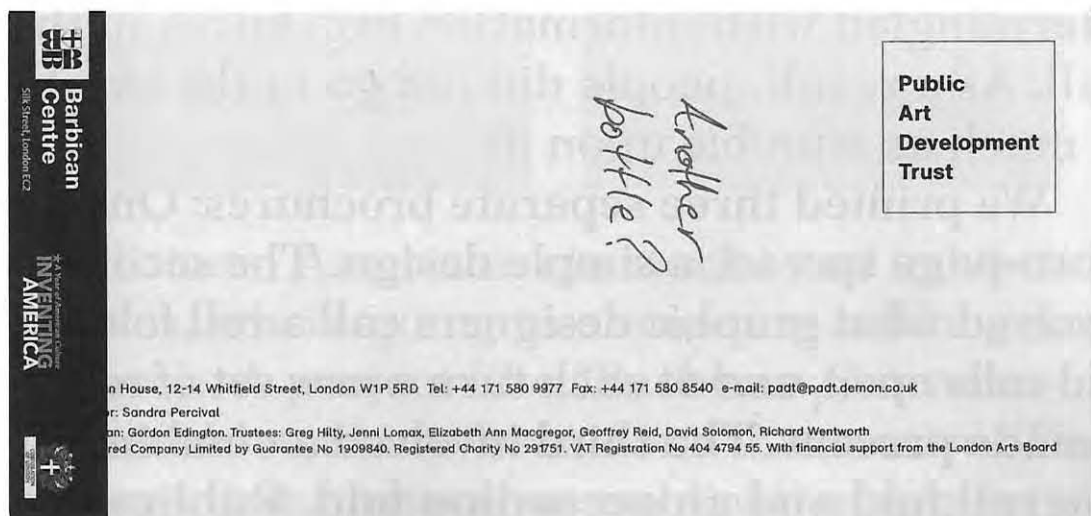
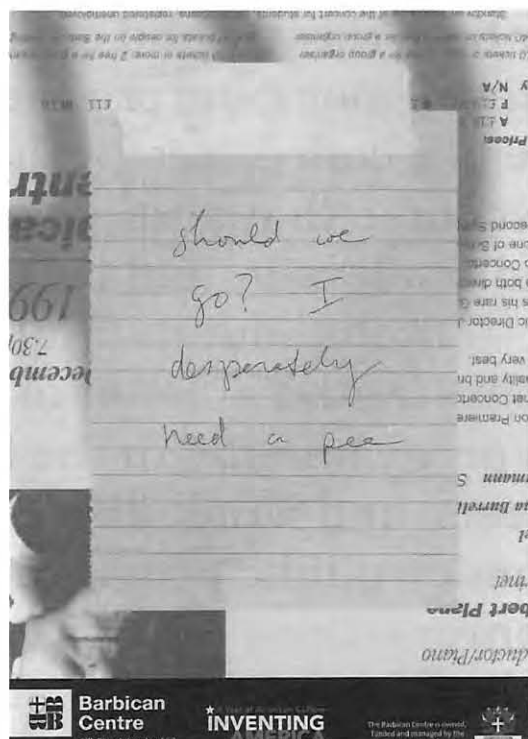
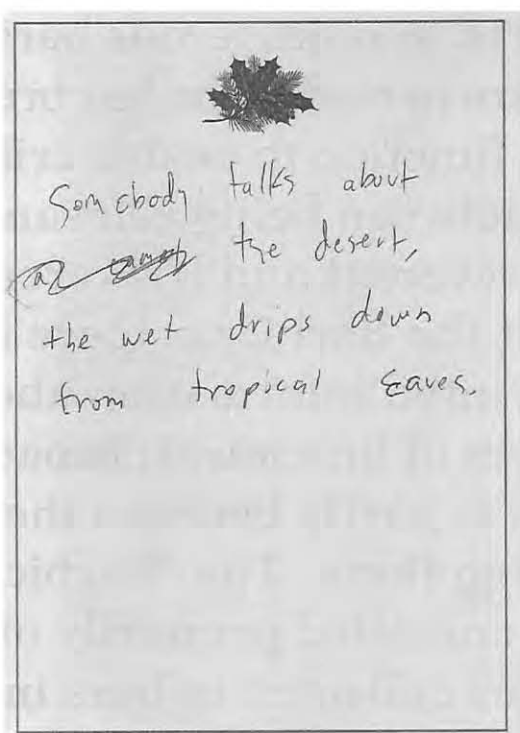


Bantering Drunkening, 2007

A recent wallwork is titled *We're Bantering Drunkening About What's Important in Life*. The title comes from one of the conversation papers within the work. A large piece like this takes me three or four months to complete; I generally make only two a year. The colored papers are especially hard to work with because their placement is decided by so many factors: the shape and size of the paper, the

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color of the paper, the actual words, and the way they are written. Josef Albers astutely remarked that you cannot put one color beside another without also changing both. This is also true for verbal narratives: you cannot put one word beside another without also changing both. This is how relational grammar operates, and how relational practices involve not just the semantics of language, but more generally, formal relations.



During the 1990s, I did several projects in which a publication served as the exhibition. Some of these I did with Hans Ulrich, for example, "Point d'ironie." I did one project in London called "Barbican Conversations," which was organized by the Public Art Development Trust in 1998. The basis of the project was to utilize the Barbican Center as both a source of conversational discourse and a place of dissemination. The Barbican is a complex architectural labyrinth: it includes a cinema, performing stages for both theatre and concerts, and numerous bars for intermissions and pre-theatre periods. The bar breaks are like coffee breaks; they function to enable critical discourse that alternates between being relevant and irrelevant, and being reverent and irreverent.

Throughout the Hall at the Barbican, there is a substantial amount of printed information about its programming in the form of brochures, broadsheets, and handbills. This is partly because there is much public programming there. The "Barbican Conversations" exhibition consisted primarily of redistributing conversations collected in bars in the form of information brochures—which were then intermingled with information brochures in the Hall. As a result, people did not go to the exhibition so much as stumble upon it.

We printed three separate brochures: One was a two-page spread, a simple design. The second one involved what graphic designers call a roll fold. A roll fold rolls open, and at each turn a new set of relations is made present. The third involved a combination of a roll fold and an accordion fold. Publication

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design is very underrated. Like exhibition design, it involves the construction of visual paths, and pushes the possibilities of the publication as an exhibition.

Over the years there have been many other publication projects. The goal of these being to take art to people rather than make people go to the art. This kind of thinking is quite antithetical

ONCE upon a time
I spent the night
at a friends - on a
mattress on the floor.
I don't know WHAT
happened, but in the
middle of the night
he slept-walked over +
PISSSED on my
head! I was -
uh - jeezus, it was
too weird. So I got
up + showered (and
found another bed)
In the morning
he saw the wet!

mattress +
blamed the dog!
I didn't have the
heart to tell
him it was...
his dark socks!

Susan's Story

to traditional American curatorial and exhibition practices, where going to a museum is like going to Church. A project like "Barbican Conversations" could not have been done in America. The few times that I have done publication projects for

American museums, my experience has always been tempered by various administrative challenges during the process of realizing the publication.



Parrish Museum Project, 2001

One exception was a project at the Parrish Museum of Art in Southampton, New York, curated by Ingrid Schaffner and Melissa Friedman in 2001. The exhibition involved inviting the artists to interact with the museum and its archives. Among the archives were several cyanotypes that were made at the turn of the century by Alice Chase, the wife of the painter William Merrit Chase. Many of her images showed small groups of people, whose relationships and activities were hard to pin down—a perfect captionless quotation of everyday life. My project involved enlarging one of the cyanotypes from approximately 3×5 inches to 23×33 inches, which were then displayed, and distributed throughout the museum's gift shop.

Another prosthetic convention I find engaging is the exhibition announcement. This could be—and has been—the subject for an entire exhibition. One of the challenges in announcement design is

to make something that does not simply reiterate or quote the exhibition, but rather punctuates it. One example is the announcement card I made for an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. The basic idea was to do a postcard-size image of a well-known painting by the Hudson River School painter, John Kensett. The image shows two people talking on the shoreline, gesturing at large breaking waves—the auditory field of nature, and of human commentary on that nature. On the verso, I printed a conversational exchange I had with a friend in NY—something disjunctive in relation to the image. After the cards were sent out, several of them were returned to the museum by their recipients. Most had a small note enclosed saying: “There are notes on the card, perhaps someone sent it out by mistake?”

Announcement cards, like catalogues and posters, have the possibility of taking an exhibition places the exhibition itself does not go.

My favorite publication project was produced for the Berlin Biennale in 2001. Instead of creating work within the traditional exhibition space, my goal was to disperse it throughout the city of Berlin. I printed four conversation papers, replicating not only the “conversation,” but also the original colors and textures of the papers (including inscriptions on the verso). These papers were then deliberately placed in various locations—sometimes one or two at a time, sometimes two or three. They were left on counters in bars, at tables in restaurants, dropped in the street, and placed on the seats of buses.

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Exhibitions, like publications, involve the dissemination of work, and create situations in which the work and an audience may meet. However, they differ in one important way: the narratives of exhibitions are inherently discursive. They are not like the narratives of books where we move from word to word, line to line, and page to page. In the space of the museum or the gallery, our movements are more unpredictable: from one painting to another, from one room to another; our path is usually determined not by conventions, but by peregrinations. An exhibition is unstable by definition—unstable, incomplete, uncontained, and uncontainable.

Like film trailers that offer clips and previews of upcoming films, contemporary exhibitions involve the fragmentation of an entity and its dispersion into a variety of representations. Our age is one of fragmented narratives, a culture of bits and pieces that in themselves become, like the ruins and fragments in Sir John Soane's Museum, a synecdoche for the whole. As the global economy implodes and exhibition practices reinvent themselves to take into account radical shifts in our aesthetic economy, we can assure ourselves that we have not seen the end of this fragmentation.