

## Writing

Robert Smithson, writing in 1966, argued that Donald Judd's use of materials was in the service of the "uncanny," producing a form of subjectivity leading to a sculptural unconscious. Judd responded to the article by stating: "Smithson is not my spokesman." It is said they never spoke to each other again.<sup>2</sup>

The task of writing on the subject of an artist's work is not to make pronouncements on intentionality. It would appear presumptuous for the text to explicate the artist's mental process, or to outline an all-inclusive strategy for the work's comprehension. After all, objects or artworks supply, at best, a "derived intentionality."<sup>3</sup> Nor should the words be used in a battle of contrasting wills, leading to a stalemate between the reader and the viewer: neither party being able to progress as every move is checked by the other. Instead the text has the ability to point the reader toward the work, without crowding its discursive space.

Stefan Brüggenmann's art provides a rich subject for dissection, discussion, and argument, melding together textual statements and visual displays; appropriating, lifting, responding, and inventing in turns. If the artist turns words into objects, it is the writers' task to return them to the text; the writers in this

book were chosen for their perceived ability to extend the work's remit. In short, to do something that the art itself does not already do. To this end, each writer was furnished with a set of key terms, extracted loosely from the artist's work, on which to act. Since the artist operates primarily with language, the themes appear explicit; however, the texts presented here invite us to engage with another strata of reading, which reveals further concerns, disregarding whether these have actually worked their way to the surface.

Michael Bracewell's text locates it within a framework of the postmodern, where criticality and cheekiness sit alongside one another, each attempting to outdo the other at every turn. Surface and density then coincide to outstrip meaning, resulting in a "situationism without a cause."

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith selects a number of Brüggenmann's text-based works as objects of detailed study, through which he links key theoretical concerns, such as the idea of an infinitely reproducible image, the act of erasure, and finally, the confrontation with nothing, situating the work in an oblique and productive alignment with that of key conceptual artists.

Chris Kraus' fragments propose a radically different approach, a text that is not explicitly but implicitly about the artist's work. The writing takes the form of a

personal diary that selects terms from Brüggenmann's work as catalysts; boredom, capitalism, unwriting all provide material for Krauss to transform into her trademark rollercoaster prose. She states that "since everything is available, the point is no longer to have things but to use them as stations in eternal flux, leveraging into the infinite." Terms are then borrowed, rather than owned, an apt comparison to Bruggemann's process of work. In one of Bruggemann's early works, "Five Minute Walk Artist () and Model ()" (1999), the artist is accompanied briefly by a female companion; similarly, in this book, he is flanked part of the way by fellow travelers. Here, meeting up, walking in the same direction, and then parting company provides an analogy for the task of the writer: to meet the work, to engage, and to part once more. In short, the writers in this time may be described as voyagers, keeping the artist company for a brief while since the nature of their enquiry, and thus their journey, coincides.

## **The Reluctant Author**

In the 21st century the artist is never alone, nor is the work produced in isolation. The critical aspect of this art lies in the nature of the relationships it forges, whereby we must examine what lies between positions. It is impossible to look at things in a segregated manner, since it is the connection between them that is productive of discourse.

Brüggemann's semiological approach, in which he foregrounds art as a quotational activity, suggests that the artist's work takes place where others have dwelled before him, where culture has already established itself; in some way, then, art is always about art, operating intertextually, where "texts provide contexts within which other texts may be created and interpreted."

"(This is not supposed to be here)" (2001) a work produced in the form of a vinyl text, and as an edition of postcards, supplies a possible interpretation of the above statement; Brüggemann's text is indeed referential, and therefore unstable, since it relies on constant relocation or insertion into other contexts. The place and time of its stable reading is indefinitely postponed. The provisional nature of both artwork and text lies at the heart of the artist's activity.

Brüggemann rarely appears in his work, moreover, he goes out of his way to delete overt biographical detail from his art. The persona of the artist makes way for the work's free circulation. As Roland Barthes observed: "It is language which speaks, not the author: to write ... is to reach the point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me.'" If the text is tied solely to the voice of the speaker, the audience remains condemned to search for origin; the same can be said for the relationship struck up between the artwork and the viewer: after Marcel Duchamp, the separation between what is art and what is not is credited to the artist and to the specific setting. In short, the artist designates

something as an artwork through his authority, and via the borrowed mandate of the gallery. His spelling out of the term "copyright" as both title and content of work, or the repeated use of its abbreviated symbol, confirm Bruggemann's interest in the control and ownership of objects and ideas. But the authority does not reside in the artist's image, a mere surface, but in his ability to influence the circulation and prominence of ideas.

Yet, in what appears to be a deliberate counter-move, Bruggemann's catalogue *Obliterations* (2007) features a photograph of the artist (taken by the Brazilian photographer Marcelo Krasilcic) discreetly tucked away at the back. The image is slightly unfocused and taken against the prevailing light. His face is partly concealed by dark sunglasses and appears to be pulling away from the shot. Here we have an image of the artist reduced to pure surface, entirely lacking in identity. It is as if he were calling his own presence into question, and thus, his ability to indicate the origin and status of the artwork. Such subtle undermining of an authorial position does not mean the artist relinquishes control, rather, it debunks the viewer's assumption that the artwork and the artist are one single entity. This conflation between personal biography and artwork offers a veneer of reciprocity and continuity, it allows us to draw certain conclusions regarding sex, age, nationality, background. We are lured into a state of apparent "knowingness" aided and abetted by the provided data. His image, however, functions similarly to the work "(This is not supposed to be here)" addressed earlier. The unstable nature of the work is reprised by the representation; it

connotes correctly, we recognize the features of a young man, yet its denotation, its meaning, remains elusive, perhaps in the way of the photographic portraits of Andy Warhol. The image proposes a "gateway" to a person, a means of getting closer to the individual, yet on further analysis there is no one present beyond the surface veneer; and it is in the nature of images to be duplicitous as revelation gives way to concealment. The search for Stefan Brüggenmann, begun as a strategy to understand his work through the person, is doomed to failure; rather, it tells us something of the nature of interpretation, where the meaning of an object is always deferred, or located elsewhere: neither in the artist, nor in the work. Therefore, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, the artwork's unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination.<sup>4</sup> Here, the destination might be understood as an orientation or direction, whereby the work addresses itself to an audience through a particular context and history. In his work "I can't explain and I won't even try" (2003) Brüggenmann finally removes the possibility of intelligible communication between the artist and the audience. In other words, he refutes the responsibility to transmit an interpretation of the work to the audience; moreover, this negation becomes the work itself.

## **Reading**

Brüggenmann's melding of image and text comments on a legacy that links Conceptual art to the present, though his work should not be seen as a

repetition of what has gone before. Nor does it invoke prior artworks in the spirit of the contemporary reenactment; no dues are paid and no homage is intended. The reason why his work might engender a sense of familiarity is due to the long shadow cast by Conceptual art. "No sooner is a form seen than it must resemble something: humanity seems doomed to analogy."<sup>5</sup> In this instance, art would appear to imitate art. To state that, "this is (like) that" traces the communalities between one apparently similar object and another. In so doing, however, we may falsely assume that the two things in question are closely related or even alike. But actually, we are simply pointing at the relational aspect of objects and language, where nothing is finite or stable.

The transformation of images into language is always accompanied by its inverse, the proposition of language as a visual object. "Texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or--if the text is brand new--through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions."<sup>6</sup> Brüggenmann is well aware of the impact of these "traditions" in his room installation "Showtitles" (2006) exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London as a vast list of vinyl texts. The artist invites the audience to use his titles for their own shows and projects, on condition of sending him copies of press notices of their later use. Here, the viewer and the reader occupy the same space, since the visual presence and the textual form coalesce. The serried ranks of the numbered statements use the wall as a page, ushering in

the very reading habits mentioned above, while simultaneously demanding to be perceived in purely visual terms. Here, the work also refers to aspects of the "dynamical sublime"<sup>7</sup> which contrasts perception and reason. We may be unable to view something that outstrips the limits of perception, though we are cognizant of the possibility of its existence. The list of titles compiled by the artist cannot be taken in by a single look and compels us to resort to ingrained reading habits. On doing so, however, we are faced with an overwhelming task, as each one of the titles requires focus and cogitation, a reality compounded by the fact that the list is endless. We can mentally conceive of such a lack of finitude, but our senses are unable to provide an appropriate picture.

This conflation between reading and seeing is further enhanced by the artist's use of neon in his work. The gas that flows through the glass tubes illuminates the text, making it seem as if the words are quite literally aflame, burning themselves as an after-image onto the viewer's retina. The text is not "read" as such, but perceived. In this instance the indelible impression of the work coincides with its literal significance: its impact reaches us at the same time as its destination or meaning. Brüggemann addresses our habitual separation between perception and interpretation by literally conflating these positions.

Light is often used in philosophy as an analogy. Terms such as brilliance, enlightenment, illumination, and reflection all point toward the use of sight in

relation to thought. Illuminated words or texts traditionally have great prophetic power, though contemporary artists often undermine this authority with their refusal to engage in pathos. Brüggenmann's neon "This must be the place" (2003) serves to draw attention to the work itself and to the place in which it is displayed; here, the artist melds together object and space as a single entity. Additionally, it bestows importance on any location in which it is placed, suggesting that the message overrides the significance of the place: that is, the place only comes into being when we are told of its existence. But the message itself is undermined by the possibility of being switched off at any time as light always benefits from a dialectical nature. The terms on or off are orientational metaphors, and present the two most unequivocal possibilities; though oppositional, one always invokes the potential presence of the other.<sup>8</sup> When the actual sign is switched off, the words become illegible, the work itself is extinguished, ceasing to signify. Here, the medium or vehicle controls the delivery/withholding of meaning in its entirety.

The statement "Looks Conceptual" (1999) presents a conundrum by referring us to the visibility of a concept. Concepts, however, are not usually held as having a strong visual presence; indeed, their physical manifestation is mostly secondary to their meaning. While it is arguable that conceptual means, it does not look. Moreover, "Looks Conceptual" provides us with a hidden metaphor: according to the theorists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of

another."<sup>9</sup> The work emphasizes the link between appearance and idea, or signifier and signified by permitting the implicit or explicit attributes of one thing to resonate with the other.

This link is extended in the installation "Conceptual Decoration" (2008). The words of the title are printed on wallpaper that covers the space in its entirety. The "moiré" effect of the repeated ten-point registration of the words provides an interference pattern that jolts the eye and suffuses the gallery in a gray half-light. Here, the artist uses the bourgeois decadence of surface decoration to highlight the "appearance" of the concept. By melding together the idea and its physical embodiment, their irreconcilable differences are exposed: looking and meaning are inextricably shackled together as they are unable to function without each other.

## **Now**

Much has been said about the contemporary nature of present artworks. The term "contemporary" does not simply signify the present, but it also incorporates a desire for the "now," allowing works to join the select roster of those deemed to be noteworthy or important for a particular period of time. The novelist Vladimir Nabokov asserts that "a thin veneer of reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on

the now, should please not break its tension film."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the fragile and fugitive nature of much contemporary art practice is indeed due to the careful balancing act performed by the artist, who takes great care neither to under- nor to over-determine the work. To be in the now means not to overstate the work's link to the past; instead the recognition of the ghosts of Conceptual art in current artworks is seen as a given, a kind of exclusive backstage pass denoting its discursive credentials. Brüggenmann's statement "I'm not afraid of repeating myself" (2004) underscores his commitment to reprising such a cultural legacy. However, the sense of presentness that pervades the work is only partly due to its cursory referencing and jettisoning of the past. The constant repetition of the present suggests a truncation of time's continuum where each instant is understood as being "now," its shiny newness refreshed by each reprise: again and again and again. This desire for an art that renews itself with every gaze, altering, yet staying the same, appears to be paramount in Brüggenmann's work "Romance" (2004) spelled out in black neon light. It is the invocation of seduction, of "love at first sight" where "time stands still for a moment and space exists no more."<sup>11</sup> The philosopher Karlheinz Lüdeking draws a parallel between the encounter with the artwork and the recognition of the object of one's love. "One has to be struck as if by lightning" on encountering the artwork, he argues, and though he warns that this is a state of delusion, it is infinitely preferable to its absence. It is the momentary presence of desire that maintains our attention, and the fragile nature of the event that briefly hold us in thrall. The statement appears insubstantial, almost ill equipped to contain what it spells out, but the very absence of solidity, of permanence, underlines the power of what it

conjures up. Make an attempt to grab hold of it and it vanishes. Desire is always articulated in the "now," time and time again; devoid of substance, it repeats each time, its vigor undiminished.

## **Nothing**

"Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence [ ... ] it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never."<sup>12</sup> Franz Kafka's paradox refers to the power of absence, of nothingness. We struggle with the concept of nothing, since absence is difficult to grasp. By relating it to our sensory perception, the question of lack may be addressed. The idea of nothing is often equated with darkness, a state in which nothing is visible. Blindness can then be equated with absence. The absence of vision, occasioned by lack of light, be it through a sensory affliction, or through darkness itself, is considered terrifying. Vision, here, is perception. And without the capacity of perception there is no world. Darkness, then, signifies the absence of perception, a void in which the perceiving subject is unable to function, and in which the world has vanished. It is the role of the senses to order the world, and to situate us in it as yet another object. In this way, we remain unaware of the possibility of seeing ourselves in the act of perception; to put it another way, we do not see seeing. Only in conditions of extreme sensory deprivation, such as in an anechoic chamber,<sup>13</sup> are we able to notice the apparatus, the ordering mechanism. In darkness,

when the limits of vision are achieved, our surroundings change shape. Our awareness of other senses is sharpened and the process of perception is heightened. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's terms, the world is revealed as strange and paradoxical and can only be seen through the intellect, through reflection. It follows that, paradoxically, because we see, we are blind. Vision withholds understanding. Darkness compels us precisely because of the irrational fear it engenders, and because of the world of perception it opens up through sensory closure. The less we see, the more seeing is problematized, and if vision is reduced to a minimum, or is non-existent, we are revealed as a body of perception immersed in the world. Darkness, then, distances us from our surroundings, and, in so doing, allows our temporary blindness to reveal them to us once more in an altered, more complete way.

"Black Box" (2008), the central piece in Brüggenmann's exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, couples the absence of light with its inverse, a surfeit; a large rectangular room, painted black inside and out dominates the entrance to the room. The viewer must traverse it to gain access to the exhibition that extends beyond. Its interior, furnished in black carpet, is illuminated by a powerful battery of strobe lights. The strobing is intermittent, reproducing the effect of rapidly turning the lights on and off. The eye does not perceive the darkness, only the flashing of the light. Perception here privileges the primary event or action, negating the secondary state of split-second darkness. Here the light might be construed as "something," and its absence could be said to constitute

"nothing." Of course, such an assertion relies on the productive aspect of illumination, since light gives visual shape to things, while darkness withholds it.

However, it is worth pointing out that such a dialectic is indeed indebted to language. Such categories do not exist in the world, they are the product of language structures. In this sense, reality or the world is created by the language we use. The world, then, is not simply "out there" but is constructed in the process of perception.<sup>14</sup> "Nothing" is then a term that exists only in language, but it cannot be experienced other than through absence, and, in common with other lexical words, is in fact a concept. It has no object partner in the empirical world, nothing we can conveniently point to for comparison. In Brüggemann's film "A Production of Nothing" (2005) the Spanish actress Cristina Piaget is shown traveling through the industrial quarter of an unnamed city. Her journey is accompanied by a female voice-over narrating a philosophical endgame. The film, unable to depict absence, functions as an accompaniment to the spoken text, which addresses "nothing" as a linguistic construct. Brüggemann's use of visual seduction masks the impossibility of the depiction of absence. We are made aware that nothing does not rely on sensory input. An object, no matter how small, on the other hand, does. As such, nothing cannot be seen, it cannot be perceived with the senses. The very act of perception is based on particular hardwired and learnt principles that structure, among other senses, our vision. The world, then, is not simply "out there" but is constructed in the process of perception. The perceptual codes are responsible

for constructing a *Weltbild*, an all-encompassing idea of the world that surrounds us.

Faced with nothing, no image is produced to slot into this "picture." We are left with an absence, a void. This inability to describe disturbs our picture, and we seek recourse in images that may circumscribe it.

The lack of pathos in much post-Conceptual work might be related to the understanding that images simply fulfill the role of the placeholder, a stand-in for the unrepresentable. And, according to the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the task of postmodern art is encapsulated in the attempts to present the unrepresentable. But since it cannot be represented as itself, something else is brought in as a substitution. What is told, or presented is often something quite different in appearance or in meaning of what cannot be shown. Bruggemann's bracketed text "(No Content)" (2004) proposes a paradox: a work bearing a certain content that states the opposite, that it has no content. Here, content is deliberately replaced by a statement negating its presence.

However, what is put in its place does not replace it; instead, it underdetermines what cannot be represented. It is arguable that something is unrepresentable if it cannot be brought before our eyes, or if an adequate material form of

presentation cannot be found. More accurately though, argues the film theorist Jacques Rancière, "a thing cannot be represented by artistic means on account of the very nature of those very means,"<sup>15</sup> due to a surplus of presence. He refers to art as a vehicle that carries meaning, whereby the material and the form produce a surplus that "overstates" what it attempts to represent.

## **No Process**

Commodity fetishism pervades every aspect of the contemporary, where "almost every kind of social activity takes the form of tangible or intangible merchandise whose value is determined by the working time needed to produce it. It is not the concrete virtues of the objects that decide their fate, but the amount of work incorporated into them."<sup>16</sup>

In art, value is enshrined in the idea of "process," a means of describing or quantifying the artist's working period. Generally, the value of the artwork might then be seen to increase according to the amount of time the artist invests in its creation. However, art differs in certain aspects from other commodities. Other than in durational work, the process is often invisible to the audience who witnesses only the end product and is therefore unable to verify its degree of difficulty or length. Bruggemann argues for a complete absence of process in his work, as he is well aware of the fetishistic possibilities of an activity that

takes place away from the viewer's scrutiny. Thus, the artist proceeds instantly from concept to execution. The work "From anything to anything in no time" (2007) bears witness to the speed of transfer between idea and material presence. The hand of the artist remains invisible throughout his work since manufacture and installation are activities usually performed under his instruction by others, from skilled craftsmen to gallery assistants. Brüggenmann's refusal to mystify process results in a lack of codification in the work, in transparency. The artist is aware of the danger of over-determining the work, which would lead to a loss of personal meaning for the audience. Art's task then, is perhaps to counter the effect of the commodity, where "all objects and actions come to us fully coded."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, according to philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "for the consumer there is nothing left to classify that has not already been anticipated in production's own schematism."<sup>18</sup> One of the tactics employed by many artists of the avant-garde has been the employment of substitution as a means of disrupting traditional modes of codification and reception. Metonymy, the evocation of the whole by a connection and synecdoche, the substitution of whole by a part (or part for whole), form part of these techniques of destabilization.

Brüggenmann's "Black Plastic Bag" (2005) and "(Lost) White Plastic Bag" (2005) depict the very objects referred to in the titles. The images of bin-bags, printed onto canvas, stand in for the rubbish they contain, for the waste created by a society of consumption. The medium introduces a further twist: the images

simultaneously distance us from the metonymic relationship of substitution, while also replacing the photograph with a canvas; in this way, the supposed value of the photograph is augmented by being printed on a material generally associated with painting, suggesting uniqueness rather than seriality. This concern with substitution pervades Brüggemann's work. We are always reminded of how one thing replaces another. The work is arguably manifested in that gap between one thing and another (or one state, and another). Such substitutions may be encountered in the recent paintings, in which the artist partly or wholly obliterates a prior photographic work. It is always important that another image is wholly or partly taken out of circulation by the action; in this way, the artist's intervention functions as both an addition (of material) and a subtraction (of information).

In a commodified culture, the purpose of art is either spectacular, where art simply becomes part of the entertainment industry, or it supplies a therapeutic function or panacea for the audience, a means of healing and reassuring. Brüggemann's work shows a keen awareness of the functions thus ascribed to art; however, though he is no stranger to the manipulative strategies of the spectacle, his work remains demanding of its audience. In particular, the work's lack of overt emotional identification with an audience eludes the trappings of the spectacle. Content and narrative are displaced and postponed, thus drawing the audience's attention away from closure and toward interpretation. This kind of instability promotes a reciprocal relationship between the work and the

viewer, whereby the actual content takes place in the encounter itself. Anselm Jappe suggests that the audience must not only judge the work, but, conversely, that the work must judge the audience.<sup>19</sup> As audiences for art grow exponentially with the expectations of a commodified society, the demands made of the audience decrease. Brüggenmann's works do not promote instant access; rather, they are propositional and require the viewer's attention. The artist sees them as a means of transmitting and augmenting information, perhaps in the way of an amplifier; the input is entered into the apparatus, it is decoded and finally distributed in an amplified manner. Thus, the role of the artwork is to act as a kind of episteme, a system or conduit that "passes on" knowledge while excluding the abrupt emergence of "speech that says too much, speaks too soon, and makes too much known."<sup>20</sup>

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1. John Cage, quoted in Patrick Hughes and George Brecht, *Vicious Circles and Infinity: An Anthology of Paradoxes*, Penguin Books, London 1978.

2. Rosalind Krauss and Alexander Alberro et al, "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," in *The Duchamp Effect*, ed. M. Buskirk & M. Nixon, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, p. 218.

3. Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. L.L. McAlister, Routledge, London 1995.

4. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text, Fontana*, London 1977, p. 148.

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6. Fredric Jameson, cited in David N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.

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8. Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics*, Routledge, London and New York 2002.

9. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980, p. 5.

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, Vintage, London 1972, p. 2.

11. Karlheinz Lüdeking, "In Oblivion of Space and Time," in *Territorial Investigations*, ed. A.W. Balkema and H. Slager, Lier en Boog Series, Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam 1999, p. 61.

12. Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories and Parables*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, Willa, trans. Edwin Muir, Quality Paperback Book Club, New

**"I'M SAYING NOTHING AND I'M SAYING IT...."**

[www.stefanbruggemann.com](http://www.stefanbruggemann.com)

Nicolas de Oliveira, 2007

York 1971.

13. An entirely light and soundproof room using non-reflective material.

14. Chandler, *Semiotics*, p. 152.

15. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, Verso, London and New York 2007, p. 110.

16. Anselm Jappe, "Is there an Art after the End of Art?" in 00s - *The History of a Decade that has not yet been named*, Lyon Biennial 2007, JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2007, p. 109.

17. Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons, Reaktion Books, London 2005, p. 31.

18. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 112.

19. Jappe, "Is there an Art after the End of Art?" p. 111.

20. Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 114.