

Our Word is Our Bond

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This is how it starts. Three avocados in a wooden bowl are wrapped up in newspaper, crumpled and unreadable. "The Recurrence of the Sublime" (2004/5). The avocados are to be replaced when overripe and the newspaper when too worn. Sometimes the bowl sits atop the pile of newspaper sheets, this pile diminishing as the work continues, and these unruffled pages, now legible, report on the day of the first lunar landing.

In his studio there are objects waiting to be used. Coloured sponges, cans of pop, a collection of glass bottles, stone figurines. There's a banner leaning against the wall: an emergency blanket taped to two sticks, one of those shiny pieces of foil which keeps the heat in. It can be placed in any way, lean in any situation, taking on slightly different shapes. "Quick Standard" (2005) stands like a sculpture, with its shiny exterior and the roughness of the wooden 2x4s, and at the same time is loaded with implication: a security blanket for the victim of the unexpected becomes a banner, a political tool.

There's a carefulness in his choosing, naturally. One could say this of any author. But Kuri's carefulness seems somehow more specific, even more precise, than say, Marcel Broodthaers's collection of old etchings or Duchamp's choosing of his *readymades*, more vigilant and more frivolous at the same time. Because although the objects chosen (and used)-a can, an avocado, a piece of grass, a newspaper, a wheelbarrow, adhesive fruit labels, an endless amount of receipts, plastic carrier bags-acquire a significance within the work. They've become a part of, become ingredients, in it. They never entirely lose their original quality. A smashed can remains a smashed can, a receipt, a receipt. Literally, they are collected, *put together*, but not wholly transformed to become a purely aesthetic vehicle. Their first identity (as Gabriel puts it, "their semantic nature") is held on to (as a reference) and so becomes part of the new narrative of the work.

At the same time, this collecting seems to have more to do with a 'getting rid of' than an amassing. "Collecting is more like death than creating, like running against the clock," he said. And perhaps aware of his own predilection for its seductive nature, he added, "collecting just to collect is like desperately holding onto that which inevitably must be surrendered. One has to be careful that it not become a fetish act in itself." It's true one collects in order to keep something alive, something which has already died. And this paradoxical weeding out through accumulation-"it's more difficult to hold myself back from accumulating the potentially perfect objects than not"-is mirrored in a similar method, step two in the process of making: the stripping down in the resulting object itself. "In this modus of collecting one potentially cancels out a part of the original function and sense but the semantic implications of the material remain crucial in the end. They are obviously visible in the result. The objects are still raw." Stripping down, cancelling out, getting to the bottom of, a Calvinist (forgive me Gabriel) exercise in how close you can get to ephemeral without negating the material. And in this partial cancelling out of the function of a found object, in this stripping bare to the essentials of both the circumstances and the materiality of the thing at hand, the object placed in a new (odd) situation becomes a sculpture, *like a sculpture*. As he says it, "somewhere between a system of ideas and a series of material paradoxes." Both subtle and explicit at the same time. "Things less altered allow more space for contradiction."

Plastic carrier bags with the words "thank you" are hung in clusters attached to a ceiling fan and slowly rotate, moving back and forth and around, sometimes touching the adjacent cluster. And when they do, you hear the soft rippling crunches of plastic on plastic, in air. "Thank you, thank you, thank you..." over and over again. *Thank You Clouds* (2004) could be a comment on our on-going, merciless consumerist arrangement, the validity of the system and its faults underlined by the absurd (a word I promised I would avoid) repositioning of a plastic thank you bag hanging on a rotating fan. It could be, but it is also futile and capricious yet nonsensically reasonable. As the bags hang, move and are blown through the logic of the created system they conceptually question the thing-ness of their thing-ness: their nature, initially brief, in that they were (are still?) disposable bags, as relocated as they are now made permanent and sculptural.

Not too long ago Gabriel said to me, "Obsession should be valued because it cannot be faked. It is genuine." But saying that, I might be pointing the reader in the wrong direction. Obsession, as being only an "unreasonably persistent idea in the mind; [a] condition in which such ideas are present," is not really-at least how just defined according to the Oxford Dictionary-a basis for Gabriel's work. That's not quite enough. But obsession in the sense of the careful building up of a system and the careful (compulsive?) manoeuvring within it. In other words, the painstaking set up of boundaries for the sole purpose of working within those

very boundaries. Or a wholly subjective creation of a system which nevertheless has a relationship to a more general sense of public system.

I've used this before, but I'll use it again simply because it's so damn perfect as example, and here, again. It's from Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* and it's the part where Molloy is standing on the beach working out a problem:

"I took advantage of being at the seashore to lay in a store of sucking-stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally among my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised the problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. But this solution did not satisfy me fully. For it did not escape me that, by an extraordinary hazard, the four stones circulating thus might always be the same four...[One] day suddenly it dawned on the former, dimly, that I might perhaps achieve my purpose without increasing the number of my pockets, or reducing the number of my stones, but simply by sacrificing the principle of trim. The meaning of this illumination, which suddenly began to sing within me, like a verse of Isaiah, or of Jeremiah, I did not penetrate at once, and notably the word trim, which I had never met with, in this sense, long remained obscure. Finally I seemed to grasp that this word trim could not here mean anything else, anything better, than the distribution of the sixteen stones in four groups of four, one group in each pocket, and that it was my refusal to consider any distribution other than this that had vitiated my calculations until then and rendered the problem literally insoluble. And it was on the basis of this interpretation, whether right or wrong, that I had finally reached a solution, inelegantly, assuredly, but sound, sound." ¹

That the solution can come from the same source as the problem—notably yourself—and still surprise you on both occasions, its creation and its solution. That a word—here, trim—can be the solution, but remain a word not fully comprehended, grasped. And that this redeeming word, which feels as though it came out of nowhere, but really, again, came from the same source as both the problem and the solution, namely from yourself, can take on a life of its own. As though it were the avocados.

Sol LeWitt said: *"Since the functions of conception and perception are contradictory (one pre-, the other post-fact) the artist would mitigate his idea by applying subjective judgement to it. If the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the art. The work does not necessarily have to be rejected if it does not look well. Sometimes what is initially thought to be awkward will eventually be visually pleasing." ²*

And he also said this, which, in my mind could just as well have been uttered by Gabriel, either right after or right before he told me about obsession: *"Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into belief that he understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs. illogic). The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of ideas the artist is free to even surprise himself. Ideas are discovered by intuition." ³*

Idea 1. In a store, the customer slip of a credit card receipt is handed over to the buyer. It's printed on a slightly glossy paper that eventually fades taking the record of the time and place, the testimony of the random but specific purchase, with it. This voucher the customer receives is a carbon copy replica of the one left behind in the store and the one destined for the bank, the only difference is their colour, one is white, one is pink and one is yellow. All three are more than similar, all three in fact are alike except for the increasing fade in the copies made. Together they form an indivisible entity, like a trinity, invalid without their identical others. Their repetition however, their visible sameness, in no way assures their equality. For each slip is in fact a separate instance in the hierarchal nature of the commercial transaction: the individual—the intermediary—the authority. They are alike but contingent and therefore create a conditional relationship. A conditional relationship underlined by Gabriel who decides to replicate the whole one more time, to copy the three digit for digit, including tax, credit card number, date, location, time. He gives instructions to reproduce

the voucher into three otherwise identical hanging tapestries, 360 cm long, 120 cm wide, in white, pink and yellow. The three slips of a proper monetary transaction, a proper contingent relationship, become (yet again) a new contingent relationship. One now not only reliant on the outside world of trade but also on the more general understandings of convention. The Trinity Gobelin Tapestry (2004) displaces not only a transaction but the nature of the beast, so to speak, relocating the conceptual deed (an activity) and its material proof into the realm of crafted (hand-worked, individual) result.

There is an undercurrent in LeWitt's words which in some ways opposes concept to perception, idea to result. As if the result, the actual thing was less important than the idea that got it there. I'm jumping here, ignoring some subtleties (LeWitt didn't deny the look of the artwork entirely, but perhaps he did/does, its object-hood) in order to make a point, that being that, then-around 1967-there was perhaps less room for both. Less room for something conceptual AND...what to call it? Something visual? Palpable? Material? Something not in denial of its thing-ness.

Is it going to far to explain this? A very basic principle, perhaps one so basic that it might shame the author here to actually put it down in writing, and shame the reader as well for forcing him to read such blatancy. But it should be said, I guess. What it is, is the careful, the intricate, the fragile line between belief and denial, between build-up and ruin, or between knowing you're right and showing modesty or doubt, at the same time. Modesty. And persuasion.

"How to Do Things With Words" is a compilation of 12 lectures the philosopher, J.L. Austin, delivered at Harvard in 1955 ⁴. The editors of the second edition, the one I now hold in my hand, write in their third-personed preface: "*Dr. R. Sbisà has read through all of Austin's notes for these lectures, comparing them with the printed text of the first edition and noting all the points at which it seemed to her that improvements could be made. The editors have together examined Austin's notes at these places and have, as a result, corrected and supplemented the printed text at a number of points. They believe that the new text is clearer, fuller, and, at the same time, more faithful to the actual words of the notes made by Austin.*" It's just one paragraph, and goes on for not much longer than this, meaning that its main gist is the accomplished improvements and a proper slap on their backs.

Two pages on, J.L. Austin begins his first lecture: "What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts. The phenomenon to be discussed is very widespread and obvious, and cannot fail to have been already noticed, at least here and there, by others. Yet I have not found attention paid specifically." *True, at least in parts.*

As though the editors somehow in all their careful reading and re-reading of Austin's notes missed the whole point.

I'm speaking of Austin here for two reasons ⁵. The first though perhaps not even foremost has to do of course with the notion of the performative which he outlines in these lectures. And which I'll get to right after mentioning the second reason for quoting Austin, this being, for his clear and very charming modesty. His ability to walk the fine line between belief and denial, build-up and ruin, between knowing he is right, though perhaps only in parts, between being modest and persuasive, at the same time.

Somehow this gentle teetering is cousin to Molloy and his rocks problematic. Austin beginning his first Harvard lecture saying that it's all been said before. Molloy standing there on the beach saying I know this to be true, but only in parts, and only for now. Both not wavering in their conjecture. Their *position*, their stance-so elegant I'd like to call it *problématique*-exudes a humility which, pardon the ballet-ness of this all, seems graceful in its quiet non-pushy resolution. And is civilised, because to create your own problem for the sole purpose of solving it does seem an extravagant game, albeit intellectual, and almost decadent in its self-imposed indispensability, not unlike any luxury item. And this elegant, very civilised show of modestly swaying *problématique* is a quality without a doubt, or better said, perhaps with enough doubt, shared by Gabriel. And very possibly, this doubting or teetering or self-inflicted illogical logic, is what makes the *performative* Austin describes, performative ⁶.

The performative, in short, is that which remains active in a phrase, always in a state of becoming, you could say. J.L. Austin uses synonyms like *operative* as opposed to *recite* or *declare*, *contractual* and not descriptive. Is, instead of about. Austin: "They [performative utterances] do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false.'" A performative utterance is, for example, the "I do" uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony, the "I name this ship the Queen Elisabeth" during the smashing of the

champagne bottle, the "I bet you" in the handshake of a wager.' Or as Gabriel used recently in an exhibition he titled "Calorie Counting: And thanks in advance."

Untitled (*And Thanks in Advance*, 2004) is a work comprising a disused supermarket shelving unit which holds different sized rocks engraved with the sentence "and thanks in advance," one letter per rock. On the back side of the shelving unit, sitting on two of the three shelves, are two plastic real size lettuces one stuffed with bookie, betting agency and lottery tickets (*Lotto Lettuce*, 2004) and the other with queuing stubs (*Stub Lettuce*, 2004). Also part of "Calorie Counting" is a work which runs along the interior ledges of the gallery windows, hundreds of sales tickets and receipts stuck onto rows of vertical metal spikes used to keep away pigeons (*Untitled*, 2004). If you read them closely, you'll notice that many thank you for your purchases. "And Thanks in Advance" is—and I am guessing J.L. Austin might agree—a performative utterance. It not only assumes an action, it also denotes a situation in which the person uttering it is pleasantly, quietly, passively manipulating the person on the receiving end. The thank you in advance implies that whatever the favour being asked, it will, assumedly, be fulfilled. Otherwise there would be no need for the premature thank you. Thank you in advance is an utterance which assumes a situation, develops certain circumstances and conditions preferable to its own realization.

Like the "I do" during the marriage ceremony, "thanks in advance" is in fact also therefore an act. Austin, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just,' saying something 7." In saying it, we are doing it, he explains in lecture II. But he doesn't stop there, and this is crucial: The performative utterance cannot be voiced at any time and any place and still always retain its performative character. It must be said under the appropriate circumstances. "I do" must be said during the wedding ceremony, "I bet" must be agreed upon, and understood by all parties concerned. It is, you could say, site and context specific

Gabriel Kuri's works are an activity in the sense of the performative. They teeter over the arbitrary, mitigating between speculation and fact. Gabriel likes to use the word *futile*, I prefer *necessary*, where necessary touches on their quiet but modest manipulation: you can't get around them. Modest and persuasive, at the same time. The thing (the object, the result) in all its conceptual thing-ness takes on an intelligence of its own, never in denial of convention entirely or of the system in place, no, using it, but using it on its own terms. Like a revolt. Kuri's works are actions wherein the question remains always eloquently unanswered: is it an interruption or does it establish a relationship?

It boils down to this; and, please, read this slowly: "It is (to describe figuratively) as if an author were to make a slip of the pen, and as if this clerical error became conscious of being such. Perhaps this was no error but in a far higher sense was an essential part of the whole exposition. It is, then, as if this clerical error were to revolt against the author, out of hatred for him, were to forbid him to correct it, and were to say, "No, I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against thee, that thou art a very poor writer." 8

Footnotes

1 Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels, Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 69-71.

2 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, ed., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), 13-16.

3 LeWitt, 13.

4 J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975). All quotes are from this second edition.

5 And am forever indebted to Dorothea von Hantelmann for not only making one of the best shows I've ever seen, *I Promise...it's political* (Museum Ludwig, 19...) but also for introducing me then and later more explicitly to JL Austin and not only to his, but her interpretation of the *performative*.

6 (Naturally the *performative* can, and, of course has, since, been applied to areas other than language.)

7 Sweetly, he continues: "This is far from being as paradoxical as it may sound or as I have meanly been trying to make it sound: indeed, the examples now to be give will be disappointing. Examples: (E.a) 'I do (sc.

Take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife)' (...)." This is another instance where we can say that Austin is making his lecture, and, here, the written lecture, a performative one. By speaking to his audience, voicing his doubt and anticipating their thoughts on the matter, he activates his lecture, keeping it from becoming simply a statement, i.e. right or wrong.

⁸ J.D. Salinger, *Raid High The Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour An Introduction* (Boston: Little, Brown Books, 1963), 95.