

DAILYSERVING

AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

#Museumpractices: The Museum on My Mind, Part III

Friday, November 2, 2012

By Rob Marks

Part III: Struggling Toward Wonder

Imagine entering a store, not quite a museum store, but a store that echoes the theme of an exhibition. All its objects are “International Orange,” the official color of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge and, as such, they commemorate the edifice’s 75th anniversary. You browse. You watch international orange bounce around the room. When an item strikes you aesthetically, you enjoy the resonance between its color, the store’s massing of color, and its expression of the theme of the show, all of which animate each object in a way that would not have happened had it sat alone.



The Commemorative Store at the International Orange exhibition, organized by the FOR-SITE Foundation at Fort Point in San Francisco, May 25 to October 28, 2012.

By “aesthetically,” I mean something very specific. I mean what Immanuel Kant meant by the word. For Kant, an aesthetic experience occurs only when, among other things, I am “disinterested,” meaning that I have no practical

stake in the object's existence, no desire for it beyond "its mere contemplation."^[1]In the not-quite-a-museum store, I engage in a Kantian aesthetic experience: I view the objects as if their sole purpose were for me to behold them. Until, that is, the moment when I think about buying one. Which happens, since it is, after all, a store.

Imagine approaching the clerk. "How much is this?" you say, handing over a piece of International Orange-colored Heath Pottery. The clerk says, "It's not for sale." "Oh," you think, "It's the floor model." You ask the clerk, "Do you have any more in the back?" The clerk explains, "Nothing in the store is for sale."



The store clerk at the International Orange exhibition's Commemorative Store.

In this moment of disappointment, the store offers two things simultaneously: first, another shift, this time from a commercial, an "interested," mindset back to the "disinterested" aesthetic experience that had, perhaps, dominated your visit to the International Orange exhibition; and, second, the integration of commentary about an artwork—the clerk's narration in this case—into the artwork itself.^[2] But had you not asked, "How much is this?" you would never have realized that the space was not a store, but a facsimile of a store, a work of artist Stephanie Syjuco entitled *The International Orange Commemorative Store (A Proposition)* (2012).^[3]

Not a One-Liner

Sly commentary, a hypothetical wall plaque, might reduce the experience to a one-liner—a joke—by offering a prompt to engage in the "right" way: "Enter; Browse; Ask to Purchase Something; See What Happens." The more traditional label, mounted on a stand inside the store, risks undermining the piece's multiple levels of experience— aesthetic, psychological, political—not by offering such an instruction, but by providing an

explication of the concept behind the work, by dissecting the joke before telling it. Both types of label make “getting it” into an intellectual exercise that inoculates against the revelation that the emotional experience delivers. You don’t even have to *be* there. Like a joke, one version of the *Proposition*—a store in which nothing can be bought—can be recounted *anywhere*, as long as you get the timing right. It’s as if you heard the joke and thought, “Oh, yeah. That’s cool.”



Stephanie Syjuco, "The International Orange Commemorative Store (A Proposition)," 2012. Photo: Saul Rosenfield, ©2012, courtesy of the artist. The artwork was commissioned by the FOR-SITE Foundation for International Orange, 2012.

But that is not Syjuco’s *Proposition*; that’s merely the idea *behind* her *Proposition*. Syjuco’s *Proposition* is a bodily experience, a feeling as well as the thoughts that attend it. The mind ricochets between disinterest and interest, from the object’s beauty to the desire to purchase it, from frustration at the object’s unattainability to engagement, even wonder, as the *Commemorative Store* achieves the rare state for a conceptual art object: its punch—not punch line—is visceral as well as intellectual. Instead of evoking the comforting resolution of “Oh yeah,” it proposes the threatening irresolution of “Oh no!” I was heartened when the *Commemorative Store*’s clerk told me that many people overlooked the otherwise well-written label. Perhaps this is because we already know how to use a store, a factor that may have been part of Syjuco’s calculation. In fact, her *Proposition* may reset the terms of conventional exhibition behavior. “Read label; view object” gets trumped by the conventional shopping behavior of “browse item; read label.” But not for long.^[4]

Syjuco’s *Proposition*, like John Cage’s visual art, benefits from not-knowing *before* knowing. Even Joan Retallack’s plea regarding the implications of Cage’s chance-determined process—“But how would one notice any of this . . . if one knew nothing about how and why you have worked the way you do?”—must recede in the space of

the *Commemorative Store*.^[5] Or, at least, it must pause to allow the visceral impact of the work to float before it breaks upon the floor of explanation.



John Cage, "Déreau 22," 1982; one in a series of 38 engravings with drypoint, aquatint, and photoetching; 14 x 18 inches; published by Crown Point Press, San Francisco. Courtesy of Crown Point Press. Cage used chance operations to compose "Déreau," displayed at Crown Point in 2012 in honor of the 100th anniversary of Cage's birth.

Against Interpretation, For Love Letters

"Interpretation . . . presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy," Susan Sontag declared in 1964. "Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought to be too precious to repudiate, by revamping it."^[6] Commentary, even when it focuses on contemporary artworks, similarly presupposes a discrepancy and, similarly, seeks to resolve it: the work seems unstable without support, yet it cannot be discarded.

Sontag's "interpretation" protects the artist from being misunderstood, from repudiation or anachronism, just as curator and critic Simon Sheikh's "mediation"—the museum's imposition of commentary to ensure the "right way of seeing"—protects the visitor from misunderstanding, from seeing incorrectly.^[7] In this way, commentary—the label, the plaque, the artist statement—becomes what artist Joseph Grigely calls an "exhibition prosthetic." Like a body prosthetic, the label becomes or seeks to become "part of the art—not merely an extension of it."^[8] The fear of misunderstanding that results in exhibition prostheses, however, assumes that the artwork, itself, cannot speak clearly enough or that the visitor is without tools to comprehend its language. Or it presumes that the artwork that needs translation for a particular visitor is nonetheless worthy of that visitor's attention. I am baffled not that an

artwork might benefit from such prostheses, but by the evolution of an experience—the visual art-viewing one—from one whose nature would seem to be its capacity to speak *without* words into one that *depends on* prosthetic words.[9]



Julie Mehretu, "Stadia I," 2004; painting; 107 x 140 x 2-3/4 inches; courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photos: Saul Rosenfield, ©2012, with permission of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Just as Syjuco's *Proposition* does not need appended words—and may be undone by them—Julie Mehretu's painting needs not even the intimation of its title, *Stadia I*, to compel. The label's text ensures that we don't "misunderstand" the work, even though both the artist, whom the label quotes, and the curator who quotes her may "misunderstand" the true impact of the piece. In its effect, however, the label corrects neither you nor me if we feel at odds with its words. For example, if the visual dynamism of the painting's vortex of energy does not coalesce for me as a "stadium"—much less as a reflection of the "nationalist reactionary energy" and "corporate language" of the stadium ecosystem—then the label contributes little to my experience. Does the curator fear that the image will not reliably articulate the correct interpretation? The label corrects the painting's assertions of itself as a parent might correct a child's make-believe. It silences the painting's own narrative, replacing it with Mehretu's words.

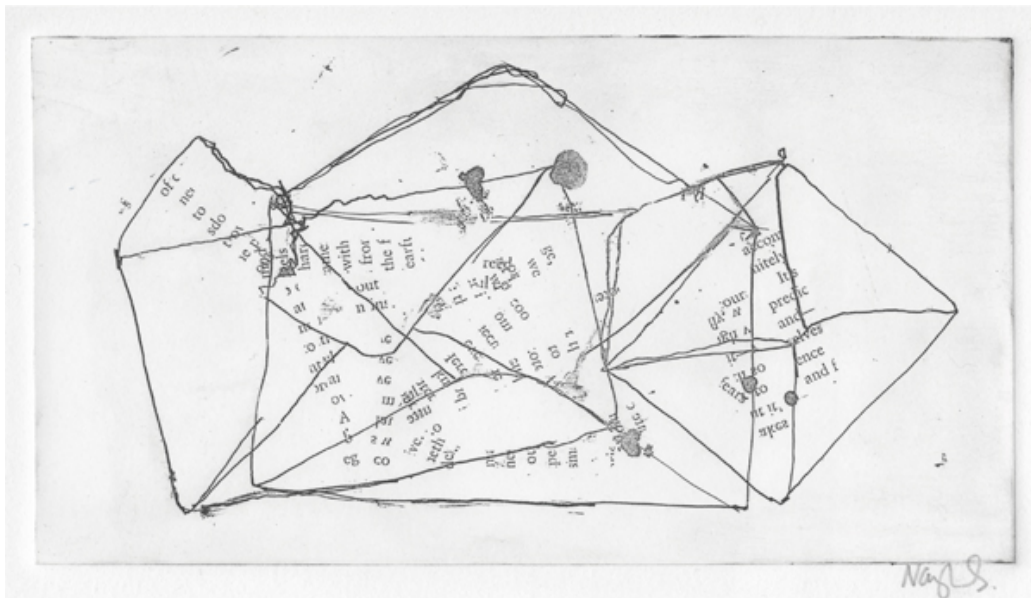
It's hard to fault Mehretu or the label writer. We live at a time when art is not trusted to stand for itself, which suggests a problem far broader than any individual artist, curator, or institution. All of these actors, however, have the power to pioneer alternatives. Perhaps, for example, the artist statement, which is mandatory today and from which the curator may have borrowed Mehretu's quotation, ought to be reconceived as a creative enterprise. Instead of recounting original intentions or documenting process or framing a single meaning, the artist statement might imagine a range of alternative meanings for the artwork, in this way explicitly taking responsibility for meanings

that extend beyond the conscious intention that inspired the work. Another alternative, of course, is silence, always a salutary approach: the artist's resistance to speak over the voice of the artwork.

Can we reinsert into the artistic process its essential communicative possibility? The agent provocateurs, the Raqs Media Collective, suggest that the artist prepares “a letter to a lover [that the artist] did not know they have, in a language that they do not understand.” The message can be only as legible as the language that binds this particular artist to a particular visitor. That is, the “letter,” even encoding “love,” is variably communicative, serendipitously legible:

The point is not to render all things and ourselves transparent and legible, but to insist on the interpretative worth of margins of error, of accidents and serendipity, of uncanny resonances and speculative layering, of doubt and ambiguity [beyond] the dead habit of certainty.[10]

Which brings us to *struggle*.



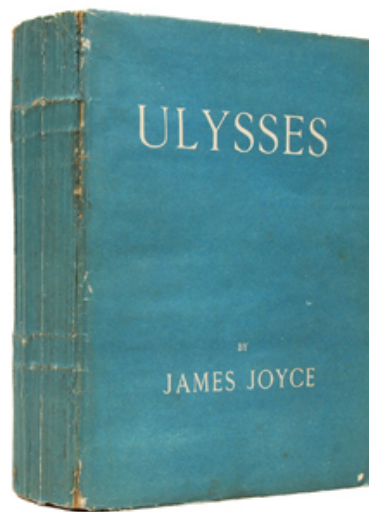
Nancy Marks, untitled, 2008; photoetching; 5 x 9-1/4 inches; courtesy of the artist; collection of Kathy Barr.

The Struggle to Not Understand

Architectural and art historian Laura Hollengreen wisely observes that labels can help “museum visitors build their visual and interpretive skills, training eye, body, and mind, and making the pleasure of the aesthetic comprehensible, that is, *contemplatable*.”[11] Might museums engage in the opposite task: nurturing the experience of, the capacity to, engage with what remains—and will remain—incomprehensible? It is a radical idea to suggest that *not-understanding* may be a viable option, because it may mean that some visitors will pass by or “miss the point” of a particular artwork.

It is not easy to contemplate the incomprehensible, and I don't want to romanticize difficulty or suggest that for art to be “good”, it must be “hard.” Yet, when exhibition commentary prepackages the answers to questions of

meaning, historical narrative, or context, its effect is not limited to making the work accessible. It also short-circuits the process of struggle, which however frustrating, can lead to a more expansive relationship with the artwork. It's like the struggle of learning a foreign language, the process that must transpire before I internalize the syntax and sound of that language. Or like the struggle of reading a novel, of reading and rereading, of understanding and misunderstanding, of knowing and losing that knowing. A summary of Joyce's *Ulysses* would not deliver the same intuitive understanding of the text, the integrated, if not perfect, understanding that results from struggling with it, from developing a relationship to it. In the end, the point of *Ulysses*—the point of all art, perhaps—is to understand the novel as only “I” can, only by reading the words as they are *read by me*, without allegiance to how they are *written by Joyce*.



A love letter worth the struggle, James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The meaning that comes out of that struggle might be different from what the curatorial or the art historical narrative prioritizes and embeds within commentary. But it is the sort of meaning that I might seek to protect safely under my shirt—a love letter next to my heart—instead of the type of meaning I might carelessly stuff into my pocket only to lose it as I rush from the gallery. This is what John Cage meant by “tourist attitude,” the proposition to “act as though you’ve never been there before.”^[12] It is a proposition, like Syjuco's *Proposition*, to be without maps and narratives, to struggle to find a way, and, in getting lost and getting found, to discover a meaning that reverberates for a lifetime.

A curator's restraint creates the conditions for such revelations, cultivating our patience and attention and granting us a permission to weave comprehension first from the cognitive and emotional material we bring into the museum and only later from the material that the museum contributes.^[13] What sort of commentary, what sort of museum structure, would enable me to see the works of artists like Syjuco, Mehretu, and Cage as only an individual “I” can see them? What sort of restraint on the part of a curator would cultivate patience in me, a capacity to tolerate all the confusions that any of us—any tourist—brings to our individual acts of way-finding: of perception and conception?

An answer lies with Kant, not simply the power he attributes to the disinterested—but engaged—aesthetic experience, but also in his radical claim of subjective universality. For Kant, the aesthetic experience inspires the paradoxical assertion that it is universally valid even though it recognizes that it can defend this claim with nothing more than subjective evidence. This is a power that leads to the possibility of engagement not just with the art in an exhibit but also among people who visit it. It is a power that lays the foundation for building commentary from community (including museum staff)—a political act—as well as community from commentary—a social one.

Rob Marks writes about the nature of the aesthetic experience and the effect of the aesthetic experience on self and society. He received master's degrees in journalism from UC Berkeley and in visual and critical studies from the California College of Art, and is the Publications and Training Manager for the Alliance Health Project of the University of California, San Francisco. The last and final part of this series, Part IV, is upcoming.

[1]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90. By “disinterested,” Kant did not mean “uninterested” or unengaged or apolitical or any of interpretive misconstructions of the word. Further, he spoke only of the moment of contemplation and not any action or transformation that might follow from the contemplation.

[2]Unlike *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*—which skillfully deployed video technology to integrate commentary within the exhibition, the mannequins reciting a form of commentary—Syjuco’s conceptual art goes much further, seamlessly making the commentary of the artwork inseparable from it. This may, in fact, be a definition of conceptual art: the integration of a self-conscious narration of content into the visceral context of the artwork such that the narration speaks simultaneously both inside and outside of the frame of the artwork.

[3]Stephanie Syjuco, “The International Orange Commemorative Store (A Proposition),” *International Orange*: <http://www.international-orange.org/artist/stephanie-syjuco/>.

[4]Perhaps, also, it forces a more direct—and uncomfortable—juxtaposition among three museum structures that encourage just this sort of browsing: filling an exhibition with too much stuff; labeling artworks with texts that, like advertising copy, justify the work as topical and relevant, even fashionable; and lavishing outsized attention on the design of the exhibition experience to the detriment of individual work so that the whole has more meaning than the part, which must strain to make its own appeal for a viewer’s attention. More about this in Part IV. (Despite the presence of labels, this was not such a problem at International Orange exhibition, where the space—the broken down fort open to the elements of ocean and wind—could inspire deviation from typical museum behavior.)

[5]Joan Retallack, ed. *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words Art Music*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1996), 130-31.

[6]Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1966), 7. The double meaning of the word “precious” resonates, too harshly, perhaps, suggesting a threat not only to the emotional or intellectual value of the work but also to the monetary investment of the institution: the publisher or the museum.

[7]Simon Sheikh, “Letter to Jane (Investigation of a Function),” in Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson, eds. *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Editions/de Appel, 2010), 64-65.

[8]Joseph Grigely, *Exhibition Prosthetics* (London: Bedford Press with Sternberg Press, 2010), 7.

[9]I am not referring here to artwork that uses letterforms or words as part of the artist’s conception of it. That is, I am not limiting art to the nonverbal image. I am, instead, seeking to honor the nonverbal terms that nonverbal art claims.

[10]Raqs Media Collective, “Wonderful Uncertainty,” in Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson, 78-79.

[11]Laura Hollengreen, “Space, Seam, Scenario: The Many Operations of the Museum Label,” presentation at “‘Your Labels Make Me Feel Stupid’: Museum Labels as Art-Historical Practice” panel at the College Art Association 100th Annual Conference, Los Angeles, February 22-25, 2012.

[12]Retallack, 129-130.

[13]For example, as John Cage and Julie Lazar did in their 1993 Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition—*Rolywholyover A Circus*—museum-generated material might proliferate in an area segregated from the work preferably outside the exhibition.