

Pavel Böhler is Research Professor in Art and Design at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has recently co-edited *Saving the Image: Art after Film* (2003) and is working on an anthology of contributions based on an Arts Council of England sponsored conference, *Not Forms and Colors: The Artist as Activist in Western Democracy* to be published in early 2004, and a major exhibition 'Whatever Happened to Social Democracy?' (co-curated with Charles Esche and Gertrud Sandqvist, Rooseum, Malm, 2004).

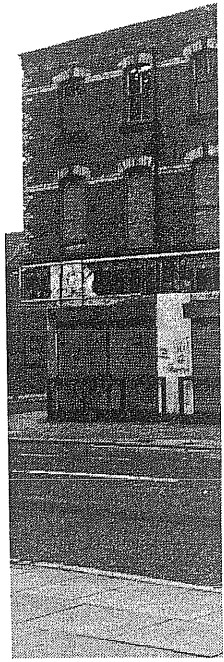
## Making Nothing Happen: Notes for a Seminar<sup>1</sup>

Pavel Böhler

'And if (art) deals with concepts, how does it deal with concepts? Why does it not look like philosophy? Like sociology?...'<sup>2</sup> Or, for that matter, why does art not look like anthropology?

It seems a good idea to start with an apology. For one, what can an artist say to a gathering of anthropologists? True, artists are agents of culture or even, as current jargon has it, 'culture producers'. What they do and how they go about it should be of professional interest to anthropologists and other observers of society and culture. And even if, in fact, artists no more produce culture than they are produced by it, their views, and their collective identity shaped in and by specific cultural circumstances, should concern anthropology. And yet, the most distinctive feature of modern western culture that artists collectively represent is the idea, central to the culture's self-image, of the diversity of art and its practices. This is underwritten by the convention that the value and validity of each individual artistic practice is in its nonconformity and uniqueness (or 'originality'). A single artist's practice represents the culture at large by being first and foremost an exception. For an anthropologist then, every artist is an embodiment of the non-representative. Or in other words (those of Frank Stella), what you see is what you see.

Anthropology has a lot to learn from its encounters with art and art can do much worse than pay attention to anthropology. After all, both often try to trespass on the other's territory, sometimes borrow the other's tools, and both are concerned with description and discovery rather than invention. Anthropology and art are well disposed to understand one another. But the traffic of ideas and inspiration



Sorry, Liverpool Bill

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*Sorry, Liverpool Billboard Project, May 1999*

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between conceptually different modes of engagement with the world is more likely to thrive on curiosity (which I take to be the search for similarity and difference) than comprehension; and understanding, in a categorical sense, is not always the point. And so, in what follows, little or no concession will be made to specialist interests: rather than trying to reconcile the priorities of social research and methodical enquiry with those of an artistic practice, I will try to present some specific outcomes of that practice as if they were merely so many ways of pointing out the obvious – that which is already there, stares you in the face, and yet still demands to be shown so that it may be looked at.

Secondly, for an artist there is always something to be sorry about, not least because he or she is permitted to do so much and yet able to achieve so little in the social world and daily life which provide the raw material for all artistic practice. Or perhaps, and for the same reason, the artist can hardly avoid moments of doubt and self-pity, feeling sorry for him or herself, for the vanity of his or her commitments. Either way, the basic operative condition of the social performance of art is futility: an artist can do almost anything, provided that everything the artist does as an artist passes for art –

that is to say, for an exercise of speculative imagination without a real, immediate consequence. This is artistic freedom – the freedom to make nothing happen.

'If art is to nourish the roots of our culture,' J. F. Kennedy famously declared forty years ago, 'society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.' In Kennedy's formulation, the onus is on society – and so is the incentive. The artist seems to be a somewhat passive intermediary in this trade-off. To make his contribution to culture, he must, says the president, throw himself at the mercy of a 'vision' which may lead him through the most unpredictable routes to the most unexpected places. Needless to say in this orthodox account of artistic freedom, such unexpected destinations are always presumed to be well outside everyday social relations, the concerns of politics or commerce, or the production of factual knowledge. Society will 'set the artist free'; in return, the artist will realize (acknowledge and articulate) his independence from the rational, practical considerations that routinely dominate society's operations for and on behalf of those who are guided by the demands of political expediency, economic pragmatism, utility and accountability. This makes the artist's practice both a celebration of the society's liberal ideals and critical benevolence, and a ritual compensation for its shortcomings and failings; both a paradigm of human imaginative potential and an exemplary compromise.

Kennedy was speaking of art, without qualifications, in the generalized sense of 'the arts'. He did not single out 'visual art' as the domain of 'vision'. Yet it is the tradition of visual art that has come to claim for itself the abbreviated designation of 'art'. This, in part, is a result of a collision between the visual image and the material 'essence' in the preoccupations of high modernist visual art. Paradoxically, it is also a result of abandoning the modernist art's claims to autonomy vested in the physical object, in pursuit of conceptual definitions of the idea of art. While the concept and historical genesis of 'abstraction' in modernist painting and sculpture parallels, for instance, that of atonality in modern music or certain experiments of visual and concrete poetry, and while the 'ready made', the utilization of found material and automatic or chance procedures are present in virtually all contemporary art forms, the notion of the 'dematerialization of the art object' (a term coined by the American critic Lucy Lippard in the early 1970s to denote an array of radical conceptual forms of artistic practice 'with occasional political overtones') has no significant equivalent outside 'visual art'. Likewise, the idea of the 'post-medium' condition of contemporary practice (articulated recently by Rosalind Krauss), with its connotations of the end of specific artistic traditions,



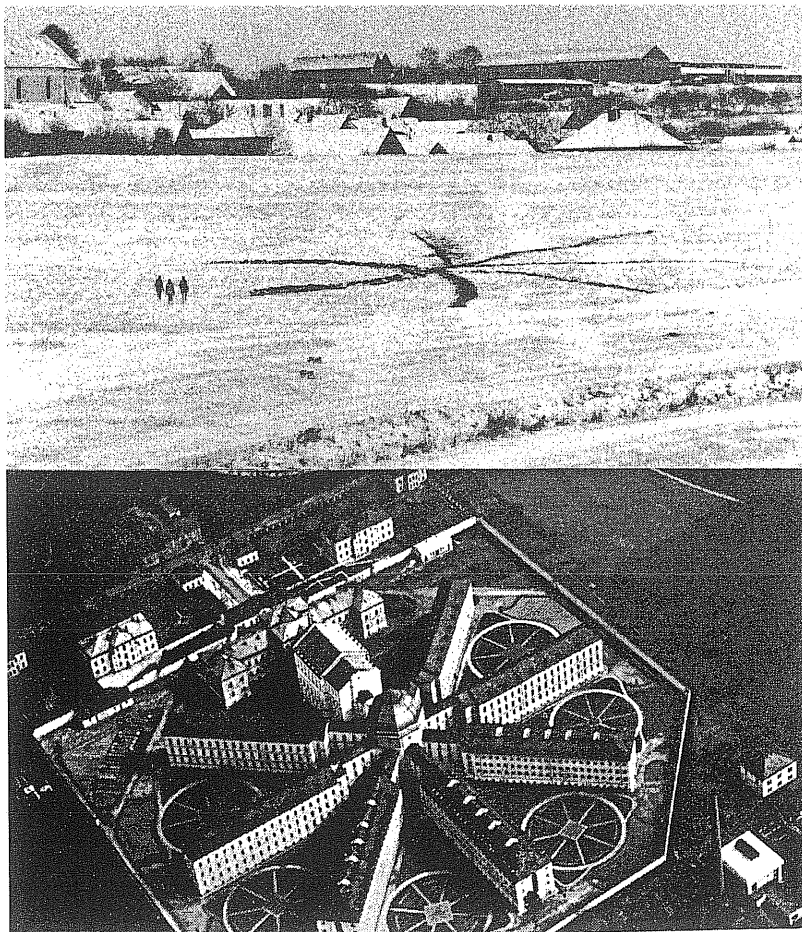
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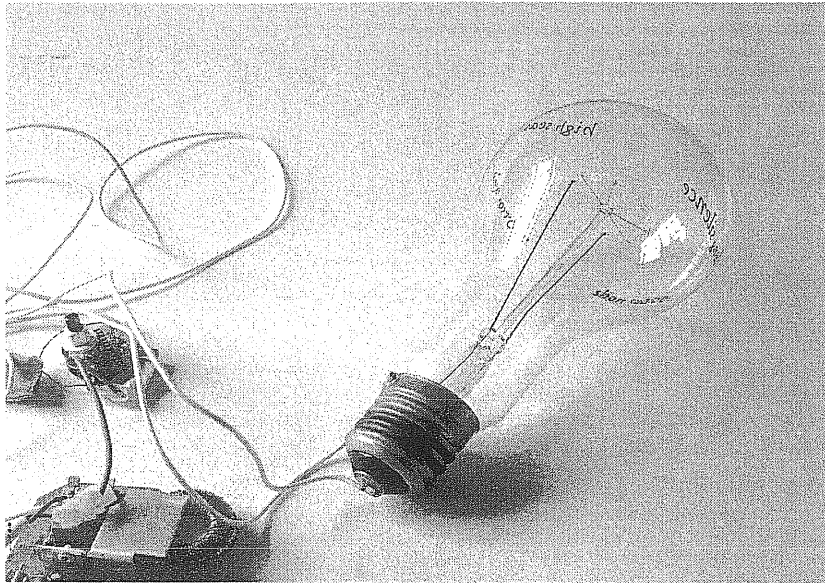
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conventions and means, seems to be reserved for discussions of 'visual art'.

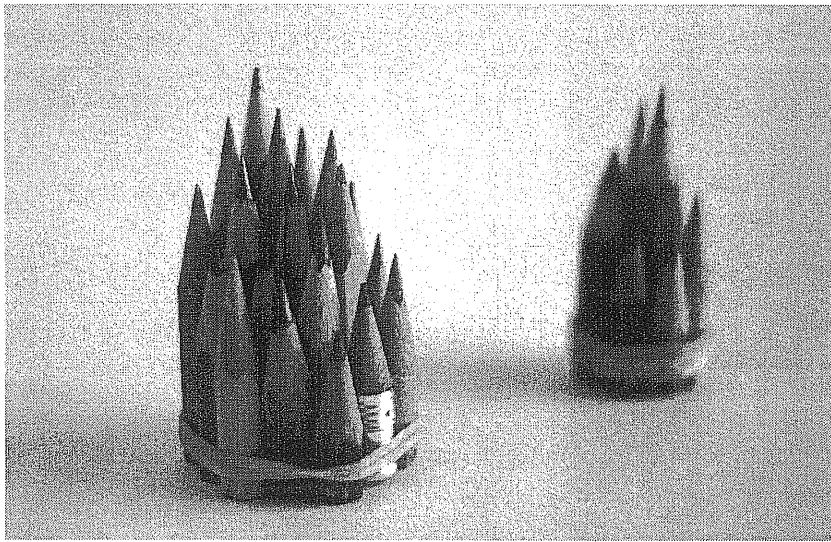
And there is another, seldom acknowledged reason why the 'visual' has become generic in contemporary conceptions of art. Unlike books, recorded music or films which economically (and to some extent critically) rely on multiplication or dispersal, if not necessarily mass distribution, works of 'visual art' are still largely sustained by an economic, institutional and critical culture centered on the sense of their singular identity and existence. This is true whether we are talking about private one-to-one patronage of a collector, specific site and location of a public commission, or the location and timing, the 'here and now', of an exhibition and the one-off placing and juxtapositions of the works in it. Strange as it make sound, this makes 'visual art' less dependent on the physical form of the work.



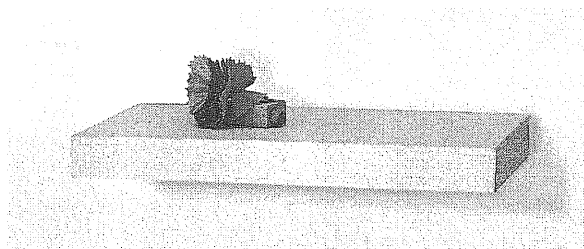
*Material Facts, 1975-79*



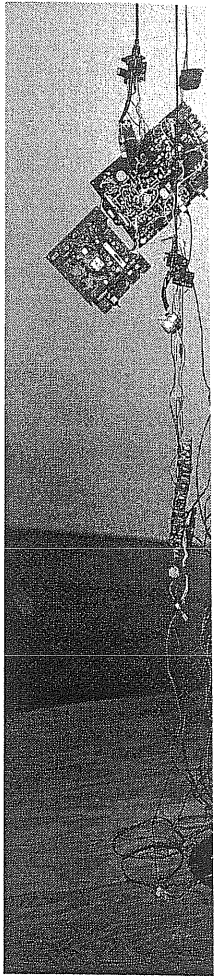
*High Seas Short Waves Deep Sorrow Long Silence, 1996*

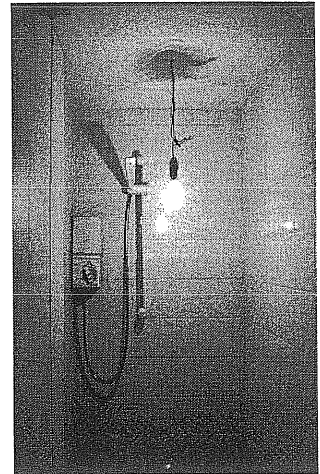
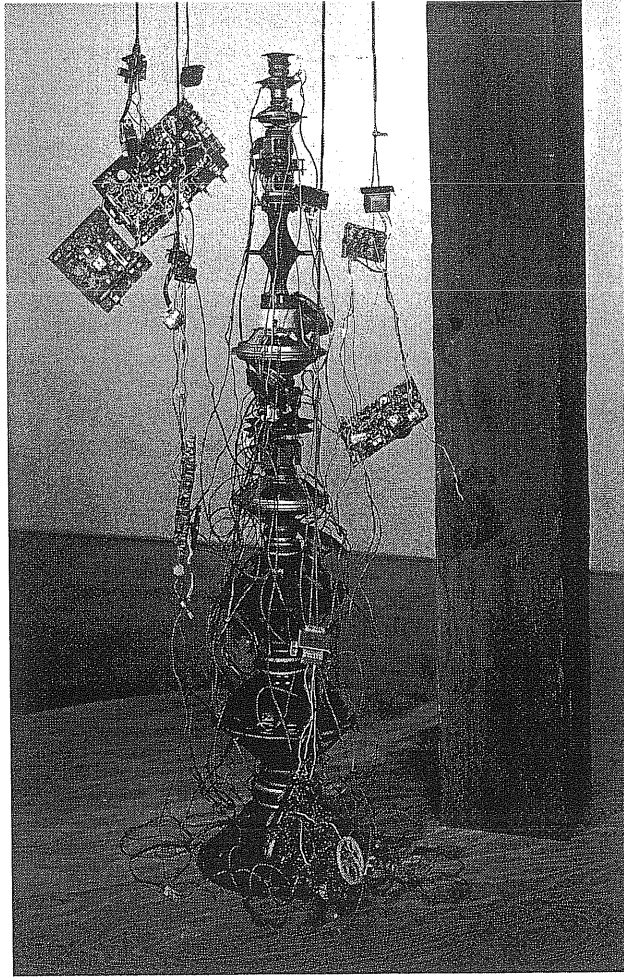


*Short Stories, 1998*



*Short Stories, detail from an installation at Art Centre Malmiranta, Tampere, 2000*

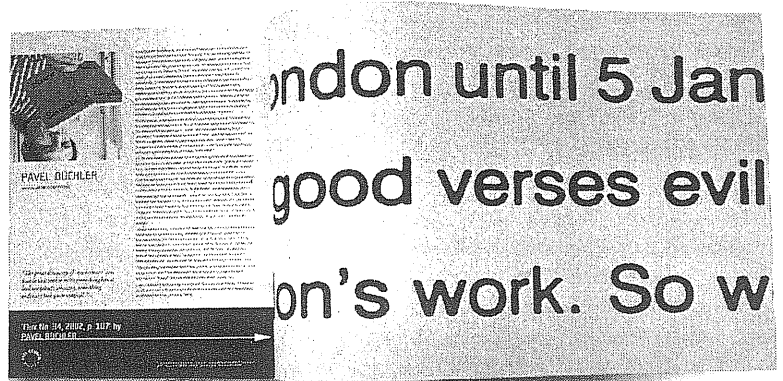


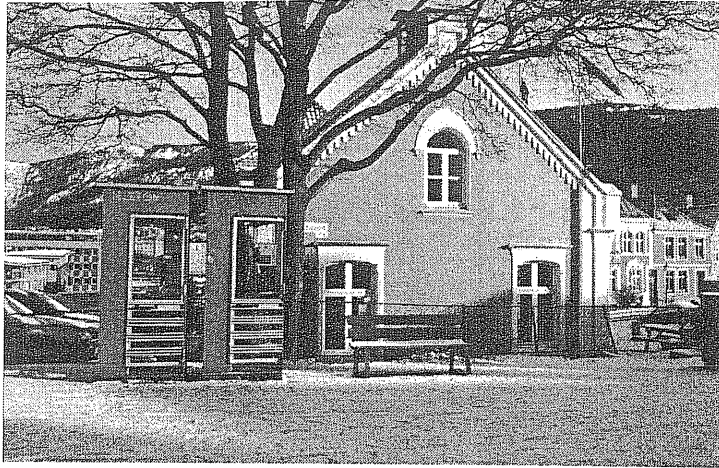


*Untitled (Psycho Analysis),  
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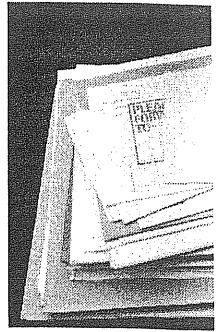
*Outer Space, installation  
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Artspace, Sydney, 1998*

*Flux No. 34, 2002, p.107, 2003*

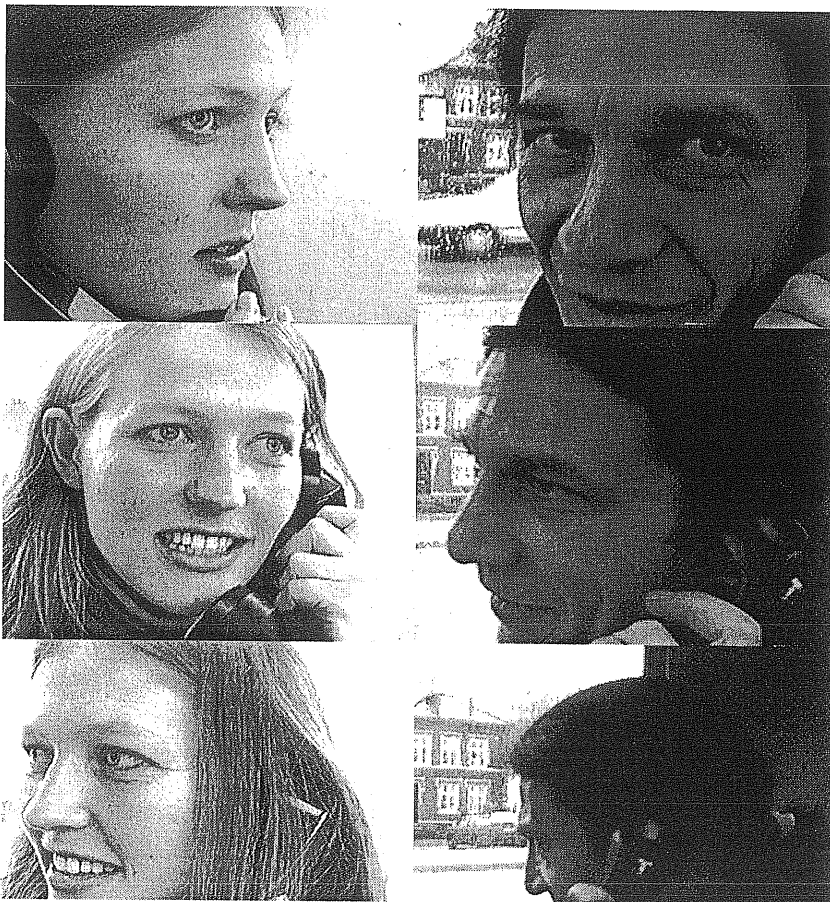




*... up on the mountain like a ship at sea: a conversation via a satellite, Stunt, Hordaland Kunstersenter, Bergen, 1999*



*Suspect Packages, 19*



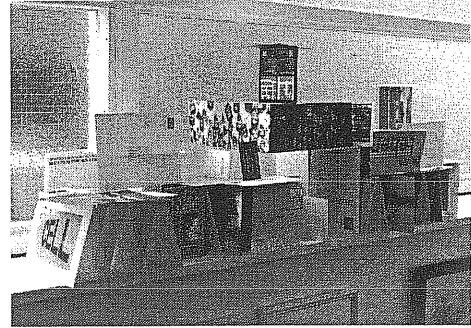
*... up on the mountain like a ship at sea, 1999, video stills*

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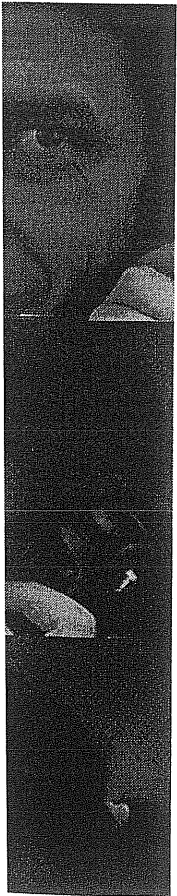


*Suspect Packages, 1999-2000*



*Temporary Architecture (Things to see this summer), installation photograph from ManMoMA, The International 3, Manchester, 2000*

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Of course, the work nearly always simultaneously exists as representation through documentation and reproduction, and indeed many contemporary artworks are produced and distributed in the formats associated with literature, music or entertainment and popular culture. But it is still the tradition of support for the making and placing of individual objects, or series of discrete objects that has provided the potential, and the critical impetus, for the 'non-making' and displacement of which those artworks that use the production methods and distribution channels of other art and cultural forms are one manifestation. Under these conditions – and together with the characteristically non-narrative, non-linear structure of visual work – the 'visual' identity of the work of 'visual art' has a scope for reduction that is not easily available in their respective ways to, say, literature or music. In fact, to make an artwork in the form of a novel or song, is to activate precisely this potential. As long, then, as the work positions itself, however critically, in relation to this tradition of 'visual art', the 'visual' can be removed. And as long as the 'visual' is nominally present, subsumed in the term 'art', it hardly matters what such a work actually looks like. (But because the 'visual' is still nominally present, the work will never 'look like philosophy' or anthropology.)

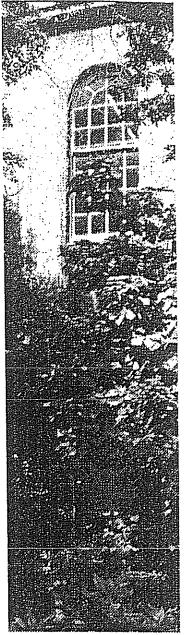
Since, strictly speaking, society must free the artist even from the obligation to produce artefacts or from doing anything that, by convention, characterizes the production of art; and since, by its own account, the artist's 'vision' cannot be constrained by formal requirements, the artist's contribution to the world would seem to be channeled by artistic intention alone, transcending any attachment to the particular and adopting any means available. This may mean that the expertise of (visual) art is becoming secondary or



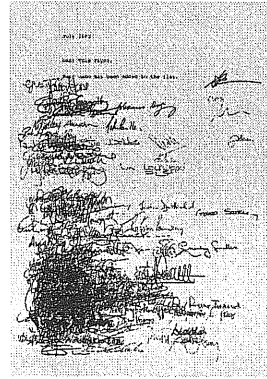
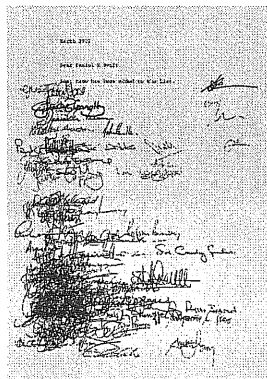
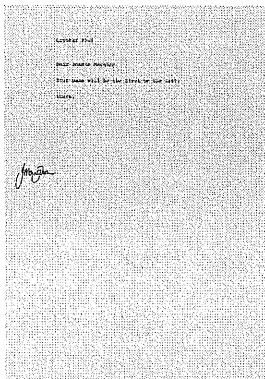
even redundant. But it may also mean that art is becoming an open testing ground for observations and thought for which there is no use or place anywhere else – for those things that are lost in the thoroughly professionalized system of social relations, and for what established liberal visions of the role of art in society and its culture prevent us from seeing.

'Material Facts' (1975-79) is a work which will serve, on this occasion, to introduce one source of my current interests. In the present form, as a juxtaposition of two photographs, it has no definitive status: it is a biographical document, or even a personal souvenir, as much as it is a work about making an artwork and an artwork in its own right. Of the two photographs that comprise the composite image, the first one comes from a landscape 'action' performed privately with a group of friends in a snow-covered field outside a remote village in Czechoslovakia in 1975. The second photograph is an aerial view of Bory prison, Western Bohemia, reproduced from a rare 1930s' postcard. The pictures clearly belong to different categories of representation and separate registers of private and social experience. The reverse symmetry of their pairing, entirely incidental, does not resolve the friction between the factual and symbolic content of the two images, but it does justify their encounter as almost inevitable: an act of 'least resistance' to what the pictures already are in themselves.

A large 500W light bulb from a Glasgow shipyard inscribed with the words 'High Seas Short Waves Deep Sorrow Long Silence' (the work's title, 1996), reversed as in a mirror, is an homage to the Dutch artist Jan Bas Ader who tragically died in 1975 on a sailing voyage across the Atlantic 'in search of the miraculous'.<sup>3</sup> The light bulb is connected to the speaker output of a modified radio receiver in such



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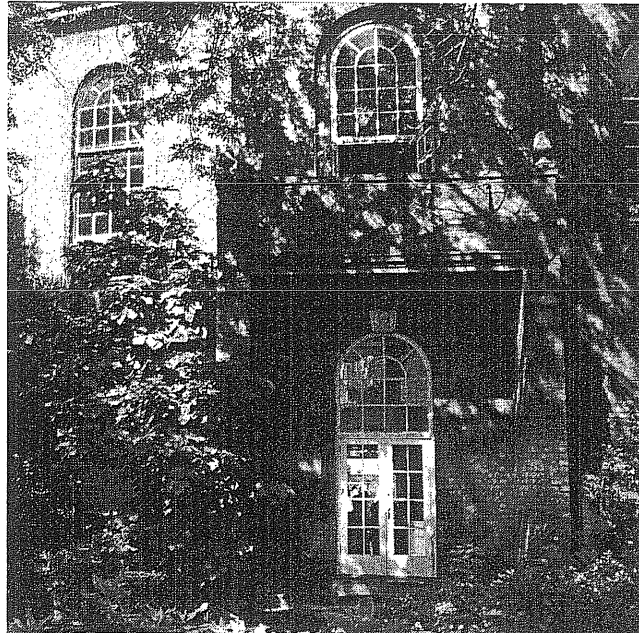


The List 2001-2003

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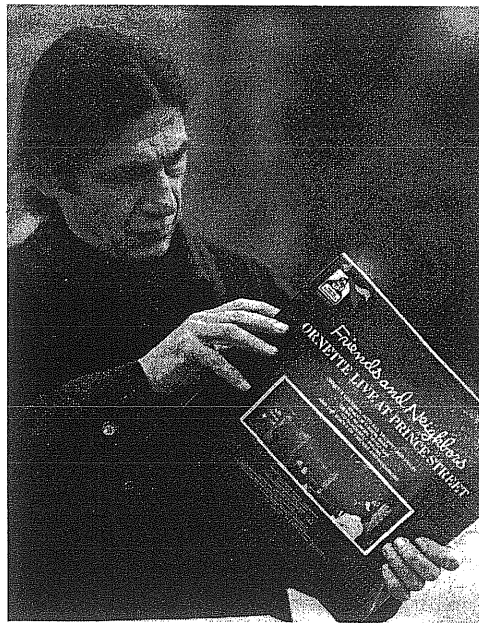
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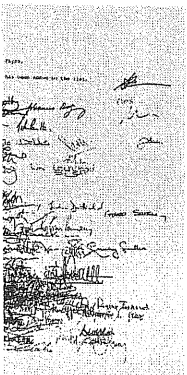
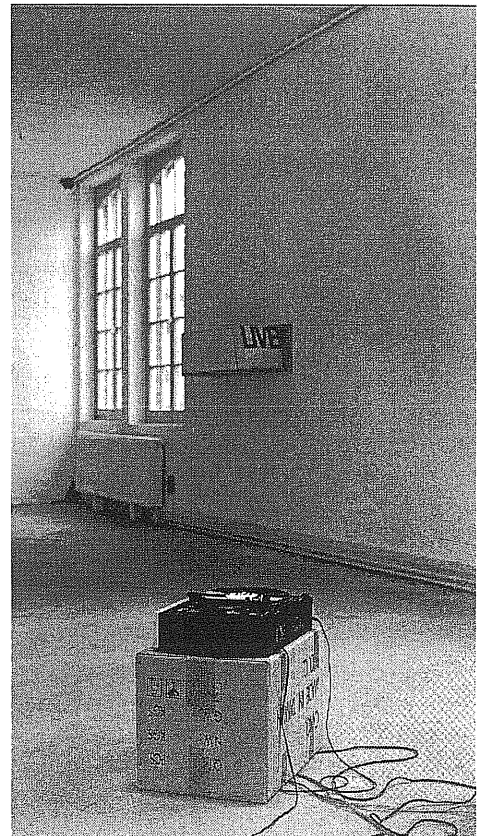


*LIVE, site photograph from Trace, Liverpool Biennial, 1999*

*LIVE, installation photograph from Ateliergemeinschaft Gramophon, Hannover, 1999*



*LIVE, illustration from Trace catalogue, Liverpool Biennial, 1999*

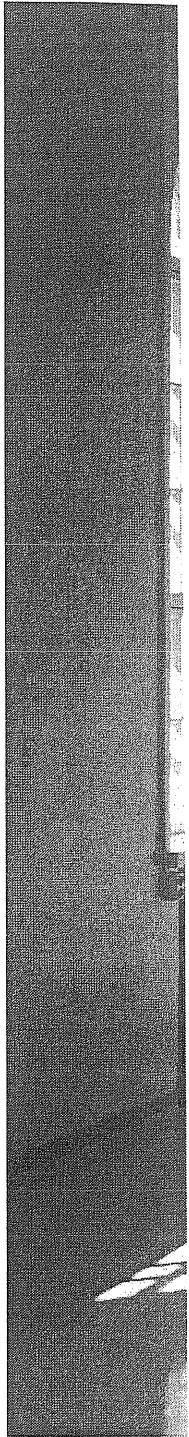


a way that the changing intensity of the signal makes the filament faintly shimmer.

The first in a series of works entitled 'Short Stories', dating from 1998, are two miniature sculptures made of pencil stubs collected over the years from public libraries in Cambridge and Glasgow. Subsequent versions of 'Short Stories' often extend the minimal input of physical shaping, limited to sharpening, which authenticates the work both positively and negatively (as 'fabrication' and a 'leftover'), onto other parts of composite works. These deploy such mechanical graphic or sculptural procedures as tracing or casting and include, for example, 26 pencils found in Glasgow between January and December 1997, used for a wall drawing based on the shapes of the typographical gaps (word spaces) between the first and last letters in the alphabetical groupings of the names of stations on the City Rail Network map of Sydney; the pencils were then resharpened and arranged by colour into three batches tied with elastic bands (1998); 12 identical pencils from a children's workshop at Tate Liverpool used to make the same number of drawings derived from (the memory of) the floor plans of all the display spaces in the Museum of Natural History, Bergen (1999); and a bronze cast of both halves of a broken pencil found in the entrance of a hotel in Manchester, displayed alongside the original fragments (1998). The series continues with recent large drawings directly traced from the shadows of various found (i.e. 'lost') objects, such as the shadow of a pierced balloon traced with a pencil taken from the children's section of a public library. Once completed, the drawing was erased and the pencil shaved so that only the eraser from its end remains (2002).

'Outer Space', made in July 1998 for an exhibition at Artspace, Sydney, was some two- metres-tall column made of 26 audio speakers and electronic components from five radio receivers bought in Sydney's suburban flea markets during a weekend shopping spree. The radios were tuned to points of 'white noise' in roughly 5 MHz intervals across the FM band to produce 'amplified silence'. As the quality of the radio reception constantly changed, a residue of music or speech was discernable from time to time or, at other times, fragments of the broadcast programme came through quite clearly for a few seconds.

The work 'Untitled (Psycho Analysis)' from the same year was made by installing a capacitor in an existing provisional light fitting in the staff bathroom in the meeting rooms of a psychiatric training group in London. Bypassing the light switch, the capacitor disrupted the flow of the electrical current, causing the light flicker and flash on



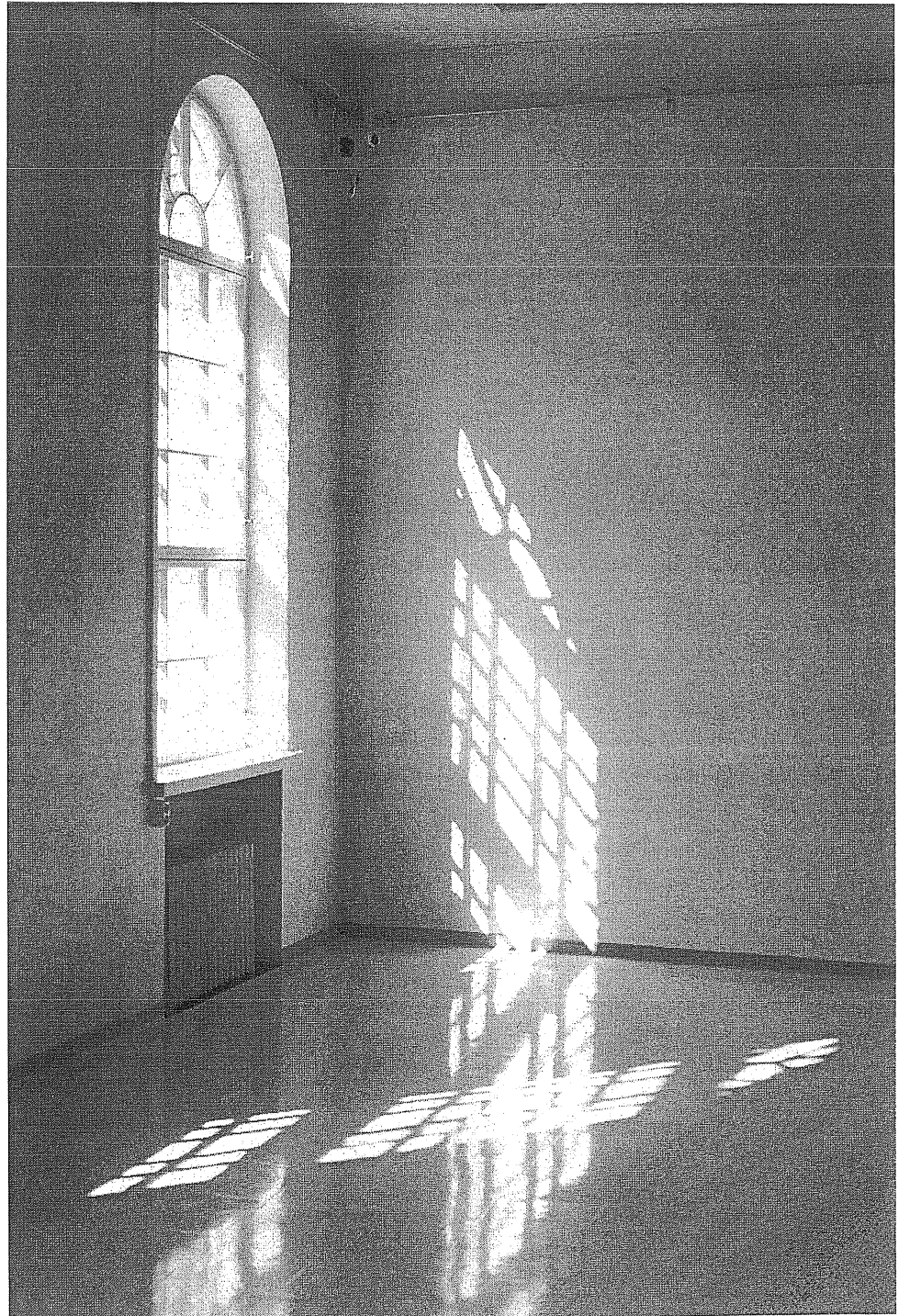
*To the World Outs  
Tampere, 2002*

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*To the World Outside (summertime 10:30am), from Conversation Pieces, Art Centre Mäntinranta, Tampere, 2002*

and off in irregular intervals; the effect was clearly visible through a half-opened door into the adjacent seminar/exhibition space.

The subtitle of the work was picked at random from suggestions made subsequently by a group of students on the basis of a verbal, and entirely factual, description of the piece (alternatives included 'Unfunny', 'Mental Health and Safety Officer's Nightmare', 'Unfinished Business', and 'Unlucky Find' among many others).

The last of the potential subtitles for the 'Untitled' work above evokes 'an accident waiting to happen'. In 'Flux No. 34, 2002, p. 107' (2003), a pure accident did actually take place. The piece was commissioned for the 'artists pages' of the style magazine *Flux* (No. 36, 2003), and is a (magnified) reprint of a mistake that escaped the attention of the proofreader in a previous issue of the same publication.

In 1999 I was invited by the Norwegian artist Laila Kongevold to collaborate on a piece for an exhibition entitled *Stunt*, in which the curator, Eli Okkenhaug, offered four artists the opportunity to produce week-long gallery projects with partners with whom they had no previous working connection. After several months of frequent international telephone consultations we responded to the brief by presenting a version of the preparatory consultation itself: continuing our conversation during the gallery opening hours from two adjoining telephone boxes in front of the art centre. Live images of the conversation were relayed to two monitors in the gallery via a video link. The transmission was silent but the recorded sound of sea tide was played from audio speakers placed under the floorboards.<sup>4</sup>

'Suspect Packages' (1999-2000) was my response to the invitation by the artist/curator Elizabeth Price to take part in *Dot*, a project which offered the participating artists the use of Price's studio facilities, including the postal address and telephone number, as a means for the production and distribution of artworks. When it was exhibited after six months, the work was presented as a small pile of letters and a framed letter to the curator which described the intentions of the project, telling her that:

*I returned from a trip abroad and found your letter on the top of a large pile of mail, most of which looked like invitations for openings or press releases for shows that I have already missed. Although I can't be sure what they really contain, I am forwarding the unopened envelopes to you as my contribution to your project - and will continue to send you all such suspect packages as they arrive from now until 31 March 2000. You (or anyone) will be free to open the mail under the condition that you take the action envisaged by the sender...<sup>5</sup>*

'Temporary Architecture (Things to see this summer)' was one of my two contributions for an exhibition conceived as a call for proposals for an imaginary

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Manchester Museum of Modern Art. The work started with a batch of invitation cards for current exhibitions of contemporary art in the UK and abroad received in the few weeks before the exhibition. The names of the featured artists, 342 in total, and the closing dates of the exhibitions were listed on a free handout. New cards were added every week throughout the show and the gallerist was instructed by letter 'to use these to build a house of cards (any shape you like) and keep adding to it as the cards arrive.' The letter also stipulated that, for the selling price calculated per name of an artist, 'the potential buyer would acquire the right to build his/her own house from any cards that he or she may receive.'

The letters from the two projects above were later shown in an exhibition of artists' cards and printed ephemera at the London Print Studio Gallery (*Private Views*, 2002), together with correspondence between Kaatje Cusse Downsborough and myself. Kaatje Cusse Downsborough approached me with an inquiry about a postcard which her partner, the artist Peter Downsborough, had sent to me sometime in 1980. In my reply, I explained that 'around 1980 I moved from Czechoslovakia to Britain and since then I moved house a great many times' and that Downsborough's card may have been among those of my possessions that were lost or mislaid in the process. I proposed that I would submit her original letter to the exhibition in the hope that 'the participants in this show and those attracted by it will be the kind of people who collect cards. There just might be someone among them who could have some information about the missing postcard...'

'LIVE' (1999) is an aggregate of 351 live concert recordings from my record collection, spanning a variety of musical styles from improvised jazz to rock, pop, folk and classical music. It brings together the sounds of audiences recorded over four decades in many parts of the world, from New York's Carnegie Hall and Brixton Academy and from massive outdoor festivals to obscure clubs in Talin or Cape Town. Every live album in the collection was digitised. The sound of the music was then deleted, leaving bursts of applause distributed over the playing time of the original recording, separated by periods of silence. All the resulting tracks were then mixed together, so that in some parts of the final work very large 'audiences' have been created by random overlay, whereas in others a single pair of clapping hands can still be heard for a brief moment; or there may be no sound at all. After its inauguration in Liverpool, where the soundtrack was continuously played from the open balcony door of an empty concert hall, 'LIVE' was released on a vinyl LP in a limited edition of 351, the same as the number of records used in the production of the work.<sup>6</sup> The LP was launched in October 1999 at an artists-run gallery, Ateliergemeinschaft Gramofon, in the former Deutsche Gramophon-Fabrik, where the world's first phonographic record was commercially pressed in 1898. Apart from the record playing on a record player and a pair of speakers, the installation included a wall-mounted shelf with 350 record covers plus a vintage copy of Ornette Coleman's *Friends and Neighbors* purchased at a Hannover flea market during my initial site visit to the gallery.

In its initial form, 'The List' (2001-2003) did not anticipate an audience, although it did aim to address unconnected individuals as though they were members of a

self-defined dispersed 'community' or network. The project followed the logic of unsolicited appeals, random distribution patterns and the mechanical identification between personal data and people in the techniques of 'personalised' direct mail marketing. In October 2001 I began replying to every ostensibly 'personal' sales or promotional letter with a note to the nominal sender (typically a person in a senior executive position) 'your name has been added to the list.' The sender's signature was reproduced below in the same position in which it appeared on the original sales letter. Every reply thus contained all the signatures of the previous senders/addressees (plus my own), building up into a dense unintelligible 'abstract' scrawl.<sup>8</sup>

It is quite ironic that one of the most 'visual' (visually effective as well as perhaps the most visible) works that I have ever made cannot be reproduced here.<sup>9</sup> Its title, *Red Flag* (1997), is an accurate description of the effect of illuminating at night (for one week) the St George's Cross on the spire of the Church of England Manchester Cathedral by a beam of red light projected from the window of the reading room in Chetham's Library where Marx and Engels studied in 1845. Black and white reproduction, however, is more than it takes to present a recent piece which, while relying on the visual and made for a gallery exhibition, was intended to be imagined rather than seen by the audience. Here, in contrast, the ambiguous title, *To the World Outside* (summertime, 10:30am) (2002), is all that the gallery visitor had. This strange constellation of reflected and direct sunlight, created by re-positioning one of the gallery's inner windows, only appeared on the wall for a brief moment every morning around an hour and a half before the space opened to the public.

Art, in general, it is often said, is a verb. It makes a difference to the world and to our perceptions of it not by producing works, but by working in the world: where and as it can, pursuing and activating opportunities which lie close to life and discovering not what may, but what needs to happen.

Instead of a conclusion, here is a question. What happens when an artist succeeds in making nothing happen?

## Notes

1. This text is a revised and updated version of material originally prepared for a staff and postgraduate seminar at the department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, February 2002.
2. Sarat Maharaj interviewed by Maureen Wynants, 'Thinking and Doing Documenta', *Janus*, No 11, 2002, p.15.
3. Ader is perhaps best known for his 16mm film *I Am Too Sad to Tell You*. *In Search of the Miraculous* is the title of his last (and unfinished) work planned in three parts, the middle part of which was to include the documentation from a solo crossing of the Atlantic Ocean from Cape Cod to Falmouth in a small sailing boat.
4. The work was produced for a group exhibition on the theme of the uncanny, or 'disquieting strangeness', conceived and curated by Sharon Kivland as part of a series of projects which took

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up the Lacanian proposition that the work of art occupies the place of the analyst. The normal schedule of the training seminars was maintained during the exhibitions.

5. The title of this work, ... up on the mountain like a ship at sea, comes from a passage in Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* in which the author describes the unusual acoustic properties of a ballroom in a mountain hotel. It alludes to the location of the gallery on the crest of a hill above Bergen and the maritime tradition of the town.
6. The envelopes were readdressed, by means of a rubber stamp, in Elizabeth Price's own handwriting reproduced from the address she had written in my notebook.
7. The record was released by the by the Foundation for Arts and Creative Technology, Liverpool. The retail price, 19.99, derived from the year of the release, was constant for any given currency. Thus in Germany, gallery visitors were able to purchase the work (at the time) in Deutschmarks for about a third of its price in pounds sterling, or a half of its dollar price in the United States etc.
8. By the time of publication, the second phase of the work will have been shown in *Incommunicado*, curated by Margot Heller (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, October – December 2003 and touring). The exhibited work reverses the build up of signatures in the first set of letters, informing each of the 242 addressees that 'your name has been removed from the list.' All the letters will be mailed out at the close of the exhibition.
9. This work concluded the original seminar presentation.