

Johnen Galerie

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Ryan Gander

10.10.2004

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'More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations* (1923)

Benjamin writes of 'experience falling in value'; that is to say, what was once integral to the communication of ideas has drifted out of reach: the art of storytelling. He bemoans the loss of the open narrative, the fact that everything is now 'shot through with explanation', benefiting 'information' rather than the tale.

Ryan Gander is a storyteller, a teller of tales. For some time now I've been thumbing through the pages of a book compiled by Gander and designer Stuart Bailey, entitled *The Appendix: A Translation of Practice* (2003). The publication is a beguiling attempt to present a diffuse and eclectic practice, one that places the story before the facts. A wilfully disparate assemblage of concerns and interests, its contents range from the perceived failure of Utopian Modernism to the individual over the mass, from material versus effect to the disturbing appeal of brown corduroy. Ideas and manifest projects spin out of control, delivered on the page and in the margins of the societal everyday.

A series of small ads in a Dutch magazine calls for 'ideas', 'a naked girl' or, more specifically, a graffiti artist who repeatedly scrawls the word 'Again' on the walls of the city. Protracted e-mail conversations result in a meeting between Gander and the mystery writer, who in turn tags the walls and windows of the artist's latest exhibition: it's unclear if this was the desired outcome. Thanks Again. Another meeting, this time with trainee taxi drivers – apprentices learning the celebrated London 'Knowledge' – results in an A-to-B question and answer in order to supply the routes required for a fictional radio play titled *The Fear*. A college lecture given by the corduroy-suited Liam Gillick merges with an album cover of Serge Gainsbourg. Transfigured by Gander, the outcome comprises a set of corduroy cushions placed on the ground, which provide the seating for a

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baffling slide presentation, Travelogue Lecture (with Missing Content) (2001). The story begins to take shape.

And so The Appendix continues. Gander provides designers with a series of instructions for fictional products, from films and vinyl releases to events, college lectures and night-clubs. In 'Brief for a PlayStation Game Poster' he asks a designer to produce a poster for a game titled Sudden White: 'The dark is the last thing to be afraid of'. Set in the whiter-than-white Arctic wilderness, the player must travel through extreme conditions to find civilization. In Sudden White the PlayStation game – the narrative adventure of modern early and middle youth – has become the scene for a game that suggests the 'less is more' scenario of Bauhaus modernity.

Loose Associations Lecture (2002) consists of a talk to slides that draws an intriguing line between seemingly disparate points on a cultural map that includes J.R.R. Tolkien, Inspector Morse, London's Barbican Centre and Gander's Aunty Deva. In the children's book The Boy Who Always Looked Up (2003) Gander tells the tale of a small boy caught in the shadow of Ernö Goldfinger's Trellick Tower; a cautionary tale of grand schemes and social architecture. Further fictional characters Spencer Anthony, Marie Aurore or Abbé Faria inhabit architectural installations and the occasional gallery break-out, as messages such as 'Spencer, forget about good' appear in the ads column of a local paper.

Gander's Appendix and his attempt to give voice to practice are reminiscent of the Martin Kippenberger publication I Had A Vision (1991). Its 177 pages consist largely of a verbatim interview with the artist. It's an unwieldy yet fascinatingly open account, somewhat like lucid dreaming, which shows the artist at his most arch, open and revealing. Rather than the curatorial version, this is the artist's account of self, an attempt to discuss practice in a form sympathetic to the work in discussion.

Resisting closure is a recurring tenet for Gander, from a band that never makes it from concept to stage to a poster campaign for an imagined video game. As Gander recognizes, relations and discourse are necessarily messy. This is the story told and the story withheld, intrigued by the hidden rather than the visible narrative. That which at first alienates is a strong magnet and compounds the desire for understanding.

Gander employs gentle reappropriation, a counterpoint to the acts of territorial control that halt free discussion of existing art forms and content. His is an attempt to see beyond the internal art referent, to hug an idea so tightly that its innards are squeezed onto the walls and out into the everyday. Somebody once said that imagination is stronger than knowledge, and as Benjamin states, 'half the art of storytelling is to keep a story from explanation as one reproduces it'.

Mark Beasley