"All my ideas are imported. All my products are exported. (All my explanations are rubbish)" (2003)

Of all of the works produced to date by a notably prolific artist, the seriously tongue-in-cheek text just quoted may be at once the most informative and the most deceptive. From an artist who stiffly resists readings of his work that would emphasize his nationality at the expense of the work's manifest cosmopolitanism, the reference to importation and exportation, with its oblique suggestion of the delayed and locally inflected reception and repackaging of ideas originating in another time and place, is unexpected. For an artist whose best-known works have been executed in a medium generally perceived as more resistant than most, though not of course immune to the process of commodification, the emphasis on product—rather than, say, process—is also notable. And for an artist whose numerous ventures across a range of media have been characterized by a high degree of precision and control, and who has commented substantively on his practice in published interviews, the apparently casual disavowal of self-exegetic authority seems cavalier. This particular work was conceived as a wall text of variable dimensions, to be executed in black adhesive vinyl lettering in Stefan Brüggemann's signature font, Arial Black. (In an era when the design or deployment of willfully impenetrable typefaces is not uncommon among artists, it is telling that this

plain, sans serif font is not of his own invention.) Dated 2003, it exists as an edition of three, as do all of Brüggemann's numerous works in this format.

In form, though certainly not in tone or idiom, Brüggemann's tripartite wall text recalls a foundational text in the history of conceptual art the prior existence of which conditions, to some extent at least, its meaning and effect. This is Lawrence Weiner's classic statement of 1968:

1. The artist may construct the piece.

2. The piece may be fabricated.

3. The piece may not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

Like many artists of his generation who came to prominence during the 1990s, the precedent of the founding figures of conceptual art is crucial to Brüggemann's work. Unlike some of his peers, however, he bears the burden of

this precedent quite lightly, and with a certain amount of self-deprecating humor. The unlikely rubric he has proposed for his work, “Twisted Conceptual Pop,” suggests that the intertwining strands from which his oeuvre has been woven include some that may have once been deemed incompatible but now seem equally, if not indiscriminately, available. The fear of being doomed to repeat the antecedent gestures of eminent predecessors is nowhere evident in Brüggemann’s work. Neither, however, is the reluctance to reiterate his own previous gambits; or so the following text work, dated 2004, would have us believe:

“I’m not afraid of repeating myself” (2004)

Whereas Weiner’s 1968 statement is couched in a self-consciously rigorous register equally reminiscent of the propositional niceties of linguistic philosophy and the fine-tuned legalese of contract law, Brüggemann’s airy disclaimers have more in common with the hasty generalizations of a guerrilla graffitist. The charge occasionally leveled at some of his contemporaries that they are merely recycling 30-year-old ideas can often be refuted by paying due attention to specifics of both text and context. Yet Brüggemann affects, in this work at least, to own up cheerfully to all accusations of belatedness, indebtedness, opportunism, incoherence, and dispensability. As yet another text work, from

2003, might be taken to suggest, he has no defense against such charges, nor will he attempt to concoct one:

“I can’t explain and I won’t even try” (2003)

Needless to say, there is a considerable degree of disingenuousness at work here. As already noted, the apparent truculence of certain of Brüggemann’s throwaway aphorisms is consistently belied by the meticulous care with which they are given their precise form, and the attention to context-specific detail that is always evident in the way they are presented to their intended public, whether outdoors in a civic or public space, on the walls of a gallery or museum, or between the pages of an artist’s book or catalogue. Born in 1975 in Mexico City, and currently dividing his time between that city and London, Brüggemann came of age at a time when most of the cultural movements and sub-cultural moments that are registered in his art, from Pop Art to Punk Rock, and from high conceptualism to high consumerism, had already been extensively commented on and codified. While the mechanisms through which once incendiary or subversive cultural practices may be reduced to a question of available style may be viewed with dismay by some artists, Brüggemann is not among them. “Style always takes time,” he has noted, and “for something to be stylish is difficult,” as if the notion of style as effortless and thus unworthy of serious consideration needed to be urgently reconsidered. The attitude of his

art—and it is, to a significant degree, an art of attitude—is one that accepts a sense of belatedness, superfluousness, and superficiality as an intriguingly definitive aspect of its age, and, by extension, as perfectly reasonable material in itself to work with.

"The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." Douglas Huebler's famous statement, another of the classic pronouncements of first-generation Conceptual art, may provide us with a second point of departure for a consideration of the specific text work with which we began. "All my ideas are imported" suggests a recasting of Huebler's statement to the effect that the world is also full of ideas, more or less interesting, to which Brüggemann is either unable or unwilling to add. Yet this is an artist who recently published a book, *Showtitles Vol. 1, 2000–2006*, listing 1271 proposed titles for exhibitions that have yet to take place. While the art of appropriation, in its various historical incarnations, is by now itself a given, a close look at the various borrowings and echoes in Brüggemann's work, whether textual or pictorial, reveals that none of these are presented in unchanged form. His is more an art of implicit indebtedness than of explicit quotation. It should also be evident by now that it is an art within which appearances can be deceptive, as two related text works, from 1999 and 2004 respectively, mischievously imply:

“Looks Conceptual. I’m not a conceptual artist.” (1999)

“I’m not a conceptual artist. I don’t do conceptual art. I don’t think in conceptual art (that is conceptual art). I keep thinking the possibility.” (2004)

Whereas the first of these texts registers Brüggemann’s fascination with both surface appearance and its inherent capacity for deceit, the second points to the paradoxical, but highly productive status of emphatic, and sometimes multiple negation in his work. In one way or another, much of this work is presented, in Jacques Derrida’s familiar phrase, *sous rature*, under the mark of erasure. The series of works in neon, begun in 2006 and entitled “Obliteration,” is a case in point. Each of these works begins life as a quick, rudimentary scribble on a page, such as one might produce to cancel out a pre-existent text, which in this instance, however, does not exist. A second, different but comparable, scribble is then superimposed on the first, thereby producing what is in effect a negation of a negation of a void. This initially content-free palimpsest is then translated by a fabricator into the material form of neon lighting, sometimes in white, sometimes in a combination of two other colors, one for each scribble. The neon is then subjected to a further process of negation—or attempted, but incomplete erasure—by being coated with black paint. Brüggemann has characterized these works as “aggressive” and “nihilistic.” Yet his is a notably tempered aggression, a crucially curtailed nihilism, given that the nature of the work’s

construction and presentation ensures that its potential for illumination and extinction are equally compromised. Partial erasure is, after all, by no means the same as total eradication. In the case of the “Obliteration” series of works, that which is ostensibly annulled is in fact amplified by the work, in which the immaterial backlit glow from the coated neon appears to hover enticingly in the space between the shadows cast on the wall by the neon “scribbles,” and the actual black neon tubing, whose visual presence is accentuated by the glowing light and pushed a little further into the viewer’s field of vision. As Gayatri Spivak pointed out long ago, in her translator’s preface to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, to write “under erasure” suggests that that which is asserted may be “inaccurate yet necessary to say”; for “ … the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace; contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time.”

Were a case to be made for the primacy of sincerely aggressive or effective erasure in Brüggemann’s work, that case might more persuasively be based on his series of “obliterated paintings,” in which found images and texts from various glossy magazines, philosophy books, and art catalogues are blown up and digitally printed on canvas, only to be more or less completely overpainted in vigorously applied aluminum paint. (While he occasionally uses photographs he has taken himself, Brüggemann recognizes no fundamental, categorical distinction between material derived from these different sources.) Yet, even in the case of these works, there is little to suggest that they involve a gesture of

definitive eradication. Unlike Robert Rauschenberg's canonical 1953 *Erased de Kooning*, a work that is often read as simultaneously affectionate and destructive, part homage, part Oedipal parricide, and in whose light and lineage all such subsequent gestures must be at least partly assessed, Brüggemann's act of erasure does not deprive the world of a unique and irreplaceable image. Far from it. As the evidence of the "less obliterated" of the "obliterated paintings" attests, and that of certain other of his works tends to confirm, what has been removed from view is usually a mass-produced and infinitely reproducible image, which will doubtless remain available and continue to circulate regardless of Brüggemann's one-off interventions. Any one of the magazine pages pressed into service for the "Obliteration" series might equally serve as the basis for one of the works he refers to more generally as "(Paintings)," in which he appropriates an existing image as a unique work of his own by simply reproducing it on canvas with the addition of various forms of mark-making or annotation. In this case the "original" is basically augmented rather than negated.

The play between original and trace, uniqueness and reproducibility, is evident throughout Brüggemann's work in a variety of media. A painting from 2005 entitled "Black" comprises a digitally printed photographic image on canvas of a model in a knee-length black dress, facing away from the camera. Shot against the background of a black door, the outline of her torso is just about discernible due to the reflected flash of the camera. Bare legged and elegantly shod in gold

stilettos, we also catch a glimpse of flesh where her right forearm is visible. Otherwise, this obscure figure of desire—the model's elegant pose, up-market attire, and shapely calves are sufficient in themselves to signify conventional attractiveness—all but merges with the ground against which it is pictured. Yet, despite the figure's allure, and the painting's self-validating status as a unique artwork, the image itself is obviously "just" a reproduction, a fact emphasized by certain evident imperfections produced by the translation of the photographic image onto the surface of the canvas. Brüggemann's artist's book, *OFF*, produced the following year, presents a sequence of over 300 individual, but almost identical photographs of this figure, which were clearly taken from the same camera position during the same shoot. Much as the figure merges into the ground of the painting, so too does each successive individual pose in the book appear to meld into the next, from which it differs almost imperceptibly, apart from the varying glimpses of the model's neck and forearm. As if to further complicate the work's contrasting invocations of infinitesimal difference and infinite reproducibility, Brüggemann's personal website offers further variance, in the form of on-line images of a selection of "unique," framed color proofs, each of which comprises four of the book's openings. The website also features an on-line slideshow in which, due to changes in lighting, the shadowy model appears to have emerged somewhat from the enshrouding ground in order to perform a jerky wiggle for the viewer, by virtue of the rapid succession of what in this format are revealed as clearly differentiated images.

The contrast between Brüggemann's disavowal of originality and his innate inventiveness, between his insistence on negation and his tireless productivity, may be most clearly registered in a range of works in several media which consider the vexed ontological status of "nothing." First there are the "Nothing Boxes" (2001)—stacks of taped-up brown cardboard boxes, in various numbers and arrangements, with the word "Nothing" written in marker on the side of each box. Then there is the short film "A Production of Nothing," scripted in collaboration with Nicolas de Oliveira, and with a soundtrack by Christian Vogel. An attractive young woman emerges from an apartment building and takes a walk through an inner-city industrial landscape while a female voice-over delivers a rumination on the subject of "nothing." "We need to look inside the word nothing to see what it might contain," the voice suggests. "How does one think of nothing? … How does one do nothing? … Even the word nothing does not exist in a void." The gently ironic musings of this disembodied voice, as it ponders the impossibility of thinking of nothing "without automatically putting something around that nothing," culminate in a provisional description of "nothing" as "a space that is left when everything within it has been rendered visible." For his exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, Brüggemann proposes a further ironic amplification of this conundrum in the form of a large, walk-in "black box" located at the core of his presentation of selected wall texts from his prodigious output over the past decade. Responding to the artist's instruction "to push the concept of nothing to the limit," Christian Vogel's soundwork, which fills the black box effectively with white noise, is "basically just output, with no input," as Brüggemann observes. Yet it is, of course, something, which is not nothing,

in spite of any effort to ensure that it might be otherwise. It is as abrasively insistent, contrarian, and self-defeating in its address and effect as any one of Brüggemann's own productions, as it reminds us of the impossibility of, as a final text-work, from 2004, puts it:

"(No Content)." (2004)

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, November 2007