

One: “Nothing”

Imagine an art that has been made to occupy a discursive void—a place where the confluence of ideas and imagination has either reached critical mass or evaporated without trace.

The art conceived to fill this redundant venue would be inherently aware of its own impotence. And knowing its own inability to communicate, the signage and rhetoric of such art would become contorted. The void maintains its own gravitational field: a place of intellectual weightlessness, in which any fragment of information, conveyed by any configuration of intentions, becomes, automatically, nothing more than space debris.

In his *Showtitles Vol. 1 2000–2006*, Stefan Brüggenmann appoints “Absolutely Nothing,” “Nothing,” and “(Nothing)” as “Showtitle” numbers 377, 378, and 379 respectively. They occupy little space within the vastness of his list, but their presence is significant within the broader concerns of Brüggenmann’s art. The assertion of nothingness (itself a paradox) is central to much of Brüggenmann’s oeuvre—a declaration which takes shape within the work in ways which appear alternately neurotic, targeted, and apathetic. In one sense, Brüggenmann delights in the tension of seemingly immovable positions—a state reminiscent of

that described by the Danish philosopher (and high priest of paradox), Soren Kierkegaard: “I feel like this chess piece of which the players say, ‘That piece cannot be moved.’” Such is the positioning of intent within the art of Stefan Brüggemann—the double negation of black painted neon scribblings, or the tethering of statements to incongruous contexts, or the positioning of statement within a void. Through all of this, his rhetoric of protest and analysis appears threaded with ambiguity. Is Brüggemann’s nihilistic intent anything more than a quotation?

It is better to destroy than to create when you are not creating those few things that are truly necessary. And finally, in this world of ours, is there anything so just and true that it has the right to survive? It is better to knock it all down, and strew the ground with salt, as the ancients did, to purify the battlefields. We are stifled by words, images, sounds that have no right to exist—that come from the void and go back to the void. Anyone who deserves to be called an artist should be asked to make this single act of faith: to educate oneself to silence.

Remember Mallarme’s praise of the blank page; Rimbaud’s refusal to write poetry after he left for Africa ... You run into a nothing: again, and again, and again, and again.

Two: “Pop”

Pop in the modern sense (you can date it from 1956—the year when Elvis Presley had his first major US/UK hit with “Heartbreak Hotel”) derives from the fusion of sex and technology. When the heightened and accelerated eroticism of glamour is fed through the processes of mass media and mass production, the consequence is modern Pop—and Pop in its turn is both a celebration and an audit of consumerism, requiring the climate of capitalism, above all, in which to thrive.

As early as 1969, Andy Warhol had observed (as he later recounts in his book *POPism: The Warhol Sixties*), that there was now a generation of kids who had grown up in a total Pop world: “The cast was a new, younger, post-Pop group of kids (like Jane Firth, a 16-year-old beauty with great shaved eyebrows and Wesson-oiled hair). All the morality and restrictions that the early superstars had rebelled against seemed so far away—as unreal as the Victorian era seems to everybody today. Pop wasn’t an issue or an option for this new wave: it was all they had ever known.”

Brüggemann has made work from classic Pop sources—his interest in fashion magazines, for example, or his “Obliteration” series of painted neon sculptures.

(It is worth noting, also, that the accompanying publication to that series of works featured an interview between Brüggemann and the pop impresario creator of The Sex Pistols, Malcolm McLaren.)

Generationally as much as stylistically, therefore, Brüggemann is without doubt one of those for whom the total Pop world—a Pop consumer mono-environment—is all that they have ever known. His reaction to this culture, as an artist, however, is decidedly un-Pop. Brüggemann's art delights in paradox and reversal. His "Notes" (2000–2003), for example, include the statement "Twisted Conceptual Pop"—the Pop source materials become venues for memoranda of negation. The discursive void is greater, for Brüggemann, than the exuberance of the total Pop world. For Brüggemann, it seems, Pop's claim of heightened temporality (Pop is about speed, above all) has been slowed by the weight of history. Pop's accumulated myth has reached critical mass, to implode within itself, leaving only the void, and re-enactments within the void.

Example: Brüggemann installs cardboard boxes in the gallery, each with the word "NOTHING" handwritten on their sides. Is this the reverse (the negative image) of Warhol's *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)* of 1964? Or is it rather the

affirmation of Warhol's desire to embrace the mechanistic and the repetitious, and to become solely the cold technology of Pop's socio-cultural parentage?

The hardest quality to trace in the art of Stefan Brüggenmann is the degree of emotional investment.

Three: "Matt Black"

In keeping with the rhetoric of signage, much of Brüggenmann's art is made solely in black and white. Similarly, publications devoted to his work are produced in a manner which prioritizes the use of black and white.

Such a stark choice of non-color is both didactic and nuanced. Information is seemingly being given precedence over aesthetics or intellectual imagination. Reports, notes, findings, slogans, instructions, titles, and proclamations become not just the content of Brüggenmann's art, but the media in which his art is made. In such a way, Brüggenmann proposes an experience of the modern world which is both directed and haphazard: a place of cultural imperatives that turn out to be either impotent or in error or both. His art is likewise filled with writing, as though with fragments from an endless (and ultimately pointless) soliloquy. The

words of a Hamlet-like figure for whom there is neither action nor inaction, self worth nor self doubt, but rather the endless deconstruction of language itself.

In this Stefan Brüggemann has suggested his interest in the processes of editing and selection. In his “Notes,” Brüggemann uses areas of matt black in order to block out sections of fashion photographs. He then adds statements and slogans, some of which appear political, others more personal, gossipy, or (perhaps intentionally) skewed. The effect is to set formality against informality, creating a collision of apparent meanings across partially obscured surfaces of image.

The nature of the somewhat fetishized fashion photographs might link this body of work to the “photographed photographs” of Richard Prince; but Brüggemann’s concern is with the conceptual limits of language, rather than the image. In his “Notes”, colliding the eroticized narratives of fashion photography with seemingly weightless, purposeless, at times conversational pronouncements, Brüggemann effectively creates a communication deadlock. Nothing is expressed—he’s talking a lot, but he’s not saying anything.

Hence the artist's work at Lisson Gallery, London in 2003: "I can't explain and I won't even try." Such an announcement might be the lexical equivalent of matt black—immovable obscurity, more concerned with density than meaning.

Four: "Surface"

There is a quality to the art of Stefan Brüggemann that is reminiscent of saltation: the sudden transition of a statement or object from one state or one media to another. The migration between flippancy and seriousness, for example, or the contextualizing of written statements across repeated images. This in itself becomes a form of volatility within the work; and to some extent, Brüggemann revels in the ambiguity of surface values. His "Showtitles," (2006) for example, or the notes written on pages torn from fashion magazines, are possessed of a flatness of tone in which authorship—such as it exists within such a free-floating use of language—appears simultaneously dulled or petulant.

The mission of Brüggemann's art thus appears to be re-stated as that of negation. The denial of gesture, the emptying of language and the assertion of an art world nihilism, which appropriates the signage of vandalism and sloganeering. One apt description might be "situationism without a cause." And

yet for Brüggemann's rhetoric of pronouncement and protest to exist, there must be an oppositional tendency—a state of meaning within which to dismantle the processes of information and language. (“Very Self-Referential”—to quote from “Showtitle no.45.”)

To what extent, therefore, is Brüggemann simply playing games with the surface values of visual culture? Statements about the nature of conceptual art are hand written across contemporary fashion photographs, setting up an obvious tension between the funky sub-cultural knowingness of the fashion image and the academic language of art theory. The two elements appear to consume one another; until, in a further contortion of irony, the text and fashion image achieve an equal plausibility as both work of art and fashion statement. The delineations of cultural status are re-affirmed as meaningless—irrelevant within the overt processes of conceptual game playing.

Brüggemann posits banality and lumpen outburst within exquisite systems of containment: “Fucking up the program,” to paraphrase one of his spray-painted statements, applied as graffiti on a temporary steel fence in east London. “Rubbish” (2003) is spray painted on the pristine white surface of a gallery wall. One can almost hear a voice protest, “I swear it wasn't me!”

Five: “Culture” (A Brief Historical Note)

The tenets of postmodernism, as the term became absorbed within the cultural productivity of the first half of the 1980s, can be refined to the enabling and championing of pastiche, appropriation, punning, and irony. The idea that new meanings about the nature of modernity and newness might be resolved from the juxtaposition of seemingly random elements, for example; or the inversion of cultural status to make ironic statements about the nature of both culture and irony.

As such, a core aspect of classic postmodernity was concerned with delight in sheer aesthetic gorgeousness: the accumulation of historical styles into sweeping, epic, baroque statements about the supremacy of image and style over content and meaning. Such, such were the joys—from the films of Peter Greenaway to the singing red bird on the spout of the Alessi kettle.

Throughout the 1980s, successive generations of art students were taught the leading texts of postmodern doctrine. Evolved from positions of high philosophical sophistication (the lineage, for example, between Hegel and Lyotard) many of these texts were written in complicated language, the syntax

of which was often obtuse. The subjects of these texts were the philosophical nature of meaning, appearance, reality, and communication.

In the way of generational reaction, many young artists felt themselves to be suffocated by the sheer weight of critical theory with which their attempts to create were being loaded. Within their work, accordingly, intellectualism became covert, a form of semiotic mischief making replaced the more literary sensibility, and overt meaning was re-streamed through the language of populism and “street” confrontationalism. To some pundits, this produced a generation of artists who were re-enacting the basis tactics of punk, as employed between 1976 and 1978—a “kill the parents” sensibility, in which conceptual cleverness was gift-wrapped in brattish aggression.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, multiple strands of activity within contemporary art making have entwined to assert an understanding of art in which the tenets of postmodern thinking are only one historical informant. In the art of Stefan Brüggemann, therefore, one might configure the joint influences of Dan Graham and Lawrence Weiner, within a frame of reference that also includes Situationism, punk, and text-based interventions. As Nicholas de Oliveira has written with pithy insight in his text on Brüggemann, “Travelling

(Light)" (2004): "The *corporate identity* of Conceptual art is then harvested like a brand and inserted into new contexts."

Identifying the artist as a selector, as opposed to a creator (of the new or original), this immediately positions Brüggemann as a connoisseur of quotation—a role which is at once rooted in classic postmodern practice, and latterly evolved to address the very problems of authorship and authenticity that postmodernism, historically, has raised. Brüggemann's role is thus to enable stylized repetitions—realizing the Warholian desire to become a machine, but in the service of quotation (cultural souvenir) as opposed to the cold functionalism of mass production. His remuneration takes the form of acquiring—within the gravitational field of a void—some potent cultural authority; a command well expressed by "Showtitle no. 261": "This is what is not."

End.