Franklin Street Works
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Kool-Aid Wino

THE CORRECTIONS
(Nine Things Not to do When Writing a Catalogue Essay)

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1

Don't start with the etymology of a word, which in this case is "error," and comes from the Latin word *errare* meaning to deviate, or to stray. It's a tired, boring gambit.

2

Don't discuss the moment when the seed was planted for the show, way back in 2004. George Bush was asked to reflect on any mistakes he'd made following 9/11; his answer was that there were none—he was confident he was right to invade Iraq in 2003; he would not concede that he was wrong to believe that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass

destruction.[1] Bush's inability to acknowledge that the Iraq invasion was regretful on any level, and his need to appear invulnerable and flawless had tragic consequences; in his efforts to build an impenetrable fortress around himself and his governance, he prevented growth. Errors, as James Joyce wrote, are "portals of discovery." Deviation from the norm, or the conventional path, is an opportunity to learn—or create—something new. This led you to think it would be a good idea to do a show that celebrated mistakes.

3

Don't start second-guessing your idea as you write. One problem with "error" is its counterpart, redemption. Theoretically, by admitting a wrong, one is forgiven for his or her mistake. The evangelical implications of this are annoying, since you don't want to advocate salvation or atonement; you just want to think about errors for their own sake. But the idea that one pays for one's mistakes is inescapable. It's even embedded in the lexicon of art history: Marks of paint that have been covered by a painter who decided to alter her composition in some way are called *pentimenti*, which comes from *pentimento*, Italian for repentance.

4

Don't try to catalogue every possible error under the sun, no matter how interesting. Because really, there are some very interesting cases. While researching this show, you heard that Amish quilters often deliberately inserted

mistakes into their work. This action was in deference to the divine: Only God could be perfect. An Internet search on the subject yielded a curious result: an online forum devoted to folk art had a lengthy debate over whether such imperfections really were deliberate, and contained an extraordinary list of things, beyond Amish quilts and their God-appeasing errors, that might have been so altered. The items included a Turkish ship, one of the fortresses of China's Great Wall, Irish sweaters (imperfections were used to identify drowned fishermen), Navajo rugs (because the imperfection allows the "spirit of creativity" to carry on, so that another rug can be woven in the future), and many more. [2]

5

Don't take the idea of the "deliberate mistake," at least when it applies to humbling oneself before God, too seriously. Critic Amy Goldin, for one, dismissed it. She understood these irregularities as a signature, a proud final flourish, rather than a religious gesture. In a 1972 essay about rugs, she argues it is unlikely that anyone would intentionally fail: "In rug literature this is referred to as piety, the ritual incorporation of the deliberate mistake, a humble renunciation of the hubris of perfection. What a joke! Could there be anything more ironic than a *selected* failure? Frankly speaking, isn't it infinitely more likely that the violation of the pattern is the flaunted signature of the maker?" [3]

6

Regardless of where you stand on whether intentional imperfections in decorative objects are a token gesture in honor of God's perfection or the craftsman's sly way of saying "I made this," don't get distracted or thrown off course by delving into the ramifications of the "signature" and "originality." Even though, it's true, errors *are* key to authenticity. To return to *pentimenti*—these marks are instrumental in helping connoisseurs determine whether a painting is authentic, because a copyist would only reproduce the final version, not the abandoned gestures underneath. To draw an analogy between art and psychology, errors may also be key to revealing our true natures. Errors, after all, are idiosyncratic—all people who act correctly are exactly alike, but those who make mistakes do so in his or her own unique way. As Freud demonstrated in his writings on parapraxis (slips of the tongue), errors often tip others off to our secret aversions or buried desires, which we strenuously try to conceal. Poet James Merrill put it most beautifully in the afterword to the *The (Diblos) Notebook*: "Hadn't I received letters with words scratched out…. Worth remembering was how unerringly the eye flew to precisely what the writer had thought better of: there, if anywhere, would be a truth unvarnished, which predated artifice."

7

But really, don't get seduced into discussing "originality." Throwing off the shackles of the past, and creating

something new and fresh, is an endless (and perhaps futile) quest. In his landmark book *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom envisioned the landscape of literature as a giant game of telephone in which hapless participants misquoted their eloquent ancestors. "The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance," he wrote, "is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist."[4] Many of the artists in "Kool-Aid Wino" engage in "perverse, willful revisionism," and in a manner that coincidentally conforms to three of the six categories coined by Bloom to describe various tactics of such revisionism: *clinamen*, *tessera*, and *kenosis*.

8

Resist temptation to file works by the show's artists under Bloom's rubrics, even though Bloom's notion of, for instance, the *clinamen*—a word he borrowed from Lucretius's theory, according to which change in the universe comes about when atoms swerve and collide into one another—is very useful when considering works by Owen Land, Rotem Linial, and Jenny Perlin. A *clinamen*, for Bloom, is a way of creatively interpreting an existing work of art, in part because the artist misreads this precursor, and takes it in a new and unexpected direction. An example of such a swerve would be Land's film from 1965–66, *Film In Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc*, which takes a Kodak color test featuring the image of a brunette in a red dress and, as the title suggests,

revels in, rather than hides, all of the film's imperfections. Land would allegedly ask audience members to pass around the film before he screened it, in order to insure that it would be as gunked up as possible—thereby enhancing its materiality as an object. The accretion of marks and grit emphasizes the physicality of the film, rather than its functionality, an idea that is further reinforced by the boring mundanity of the pretty girl who remains static while all of the so-called "imperfections," the sprocket holes and so forth, keep appearing and disappearing in a lively, rhythmic dance.

The notion of the *clinamen*, or a deliberate misreading of an earlier work of art, is a factor in Linial's work, *Fortuna*, 2013. *Fortuna* is a wooden box mounted on the wall (the artist describes it as "reminiscent of a single Judd 'stack'"), which employs a simple motor and pulley system that manipulates color transparencies of Giorgio Vasari's *Battle of Marciano*. The image is often blurry and illegible, but every once in a while resolves into a clear reproduction for a split second. Vasari's fresco, in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, allegedly covers a lost painting by Leonardo da Vinci—a painting da Vinci reportedly abandoned after trying a new technique with oil paints that he considered a failure. A flag borne by a soldier in Vasari's painting is supposedly a clue: it reads "Cerca Trova," which roughly translates as "one searches, one finds." Linial's shuddering, analog projection pays homage to the way that we are constantly looking for clues to the past in current works, the way that the past continues to haunt us, the way we can't quite keep it in focus, and so it is constantly shifting and eluding our efforts to capture it. Our attempts to

represent the past yield, often unintentionally, entirely new and original works of art.

Wrestling with an earlier work by creatively reinterpreting it—or, as Bloom puts it, committing an act of "poetic misprision"— is the focus of Perlin's *Sight Reading*. This seven-minute, three-channel video installation from 2004 consists of three projections lined up next to each other on the wall. Each projection shows the same setting: a grand piano in a spacious, sun-lit room. A different classically trained, skilled pianist sits at each instrument. Before them is Robert Schumann's piano concerto in A minor. They begin, simultaneously, to lunge at the keyboard, unleashing a storm of chords. Then one player hits a wrong note, barely discernible to the average listener. That pianist's projection goes black for five seconds. When the image returns, the performance is not at the point where it left off, but five seconds later. The length of the cut coincides with the "real" time of the performance. This ruthless system, combined with the varying speeds at which the musicians play, creates a mounting sense of discord that subsides as first one pianist finishes, then the next, until the last one carefully works her way to the end of the piece. Perlin's intervention in the video counters our usual understanding of the purpose of editing: to give an appearance of seamlessness. Film or video editing is meant to disguise errors, not draw attention to them. Moreover, *Sight Reading* exposes the "dirty secrets" of the learning process: only after we commit mistakes, and misread the original instructions, do we make the piece of music our own, an interpretation that is in dialogue with the composer rather than a rote exercise.

Tessera, another one of Bloom's categories, is useful when considering works by Frank Heath and Choi Dachal. According to its contemporary definition, a *tessera* is a piece of a mosaic; Bloom uses the word in accordance with its ancient origins, when it referred to a broken object or fragment that, when fitted with its counterpart, served to authenticate its bearer as trustworthy and official. He quotes Anthony Wilden, Lacan's translator: "The *tessera* was employed in the early mystery religions where fitting together again the two halves of a broken piece of pottery was used as a means of recognition by the initiates." Bloom's sense of how *tessera* operates in poetry is that a poet retains the general ideas of her precursor but also "completes" them, extending the ideas even further than the original.

Both Heath and Dachal literally apply the *tessera* strategy: Heath breaks objects apart and then attempts to reunite them, while Dachal fits together discrete objects into a single, seemingly contiguous whole. Heath's sculptures, part of a series titled *Former Structures*, 2012, appear as though they were found in an office supply or hardware store—a grid of small boxes looks like a cabinet meant to sort mail, a piece of wood resembles architectural molding, a white Plexiglas object might be a tray to sort small items. Before exhibiting them, he splits the objects in half and mails one half to a site that no longer exists. (The objects on view here were all originally displayed at Simone Subal Gallery in New York, which served as the "return" address for the packages. Only two of the three came back; the missing half of the cabinet-like object is represented by a print of a screengrab of the United States

Postal Service's online tracking system, which registers its status as "undelivered.") In so doing the USPS becomes an unwitting collaborator, wrapping the object in protective plastic and putting a "return-to-sender" label on it. Heath finds chinks in the reliable masonry of civic institutions—the postal system, urban planning. The ghost site that he sends packages to was once an actual address; the parcel thereby unearths a history that had been innocently papered over via administrative upkeep. The objects returned to sender are pentimentos of a sort—they are clues that reveal a forgotten past long buried by new architecture.

Each of the photographs in Dachal's series, "The Malformed Intersection," 2012, features a dress shirt that has been pressed and folded neatly. They still bear the red tag proving they are freshly dry-cleaned. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that something about each shirt is slightly off. The patterns on either side of the row of buttons don't quite line up, revealing that there are actually two shirts—they are buttoned together and folded so that it appears to be a single shirt. For the project, Dachal finds shirts with nearly identical patterns, then sends them to Korean dry cleaners in New Haven, Connecticut. The ethnicity is relevant—as a Korean national living in the United States, Dachal experiences occasional cultural dissonance, a sense of having two homes, two identities, which almost fit together, but not quite. The almost identical shirts capture this feeling of displacement; it is a lost *tessera* without an obvious match.

Kenosis refers to an important biblical event, that of Jesus accepting mortal rather than divine status. Bloom

uses this portentous word to refer to poets who break away from their seemingly greater predecessors—an act of apparent humility that in fact enables the younger poets to carry out heretofore unachievable works. Both Aki Sasamoto and Alice Miceli break from grand narratives of the past to render their own novel compositions. Domestic furniture functions as the main component of Sasamoto's sculptures, but she transforms these everyday items into surreal assemblages, often filling them with concrete that she then inscribes with words. Sasamoto's practice has a gently irascible, ludicrous flavor that makes it difficult to describe or encapsulate. Besides making objects, she lectures audiences on the pros and cons of plain versus leopard-print panties, or addresses the vicissitudes of history, and the way that historical records are biased. For "Kool-Aid Wino," she took a dresser with a top that unfolds into a desk, and a smaller chest of drawers, and jigsawed them together into a strange, unwieldy configuration. During a performance at the opening reception, Sasamoto did a "slow dance" with the piece of furniture while accompanied by "Sunny," a bluesy pop song by Bobby Hebb that was released in 1966. Sasamoto was drawn to the song for its deceptively optimistic title and upbeat lyrics, which are undercut by the melody in a minor key. (Incidentally, the song was first recorded in Sasamoto's native Japan.) She was also moved by the background to the song, which was written within the forty-eight hours following the deaths of President John Kennedy and Hebb's older brother, Harold, who was stabbed to death. For the artist, Bobby Hebb's extraordinary lyrics, advocating a positive attitude in the face

of extremely difficult circumstances, are the essence of humility, and more importantly *charisma*—a term that she is constantly examining and trying to define. During her performance, she wrote notes in concrete that she poured into the drawers; these are left as a document of her lecture.

In her contribution to "Kool-Aid Wino," the video *Piper (7.918 frames)*, 2013, Alice Miceli takes on the children's fable of the Pied Piper. Working with a composer, Brazilian musicologist Gabriel Mesquita, and using an image of children wearing nineteenth-century dress walking away from the viewer down a bucolic road, Miceli developed a system that makes the image appear lit by a strobe, animated to the tempo of the classical music that accompanies it (the first movement of Bach's Partita in A minor for solo flute, called "Allemande"). *Piper (7.918 frames)* performs an act of *kenosis* because it strips away the story's fictional and historically relevant elements, and leaves only the basic mechanics—a flickering, haunting image of children wandering off and a sentimental piece of music that endlessly repeats. The relationship between image and music in the video are inextricably intertwined, making for a synaesthetic relationship. Yet the rate at which we see is not at all the same at which we hear. According to the artist, "although the sound and image values are rigorously in synch, many sudden changes in time, which we are able to hear as full rich sounds, make for subliminal changes in the image too fast to be seen. At moments these subtleties reach a point that generates errors in perception, in the sense that audio and visuals appear disassociated, although physically they never are."

9

Don't dwell overlong on whether "error" holds up as an exhibition premise. It probably won't. Concentrate instead on the source of the show's title, from words written by Richard Brautigan. Brautigan was a poet who became famous for his wordplay and flagrant disregard for rules of grammar and form. Activating language in unusual ways allowed his wildly inventive voice to shine through. "The Kool-Aid Wino" is the title of a chapter in his book *Trout Fishing in America*, a poignant vignette about a poor boy who goes to great lengths to stretch one small packet of Kool-Aid as far as he can. His efforts to do so are ingenious and laborious, and also, ultimately, successful. As Brautigan writes in the story's final line, "He created his own Kool-Aid reality and was able to illuminate himself by it."[5]

NOTES

1

"Transcript of Bush's Remarks on Iraq: 'We Will Finish the Work of the Fallen,'" *The New York Times*, April 14, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/14/politics/14BTEX.html?pagewanted=all, retrieved July 3, 2013.

2

Mudcat.org, http://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=97962

3

Amy Goldin, "Rugs," *Art in a Hairshirt: Art Criticism 1964–1978*, ed. Robert Kushner (Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2011), 120.

4

Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 [First published in 1973]), 30.

5

Richard Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2010, first published in 1967), 10.

Anne Carson, Choi Dachal, Frank Heath, Owen Land, Rotem Linial, James Merrill, Alice Miceli, Jenny Perlin, Aki Sasamoto

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