

On Mar 9, 2015, at 12:30 PM, Michael Ned Holte <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Following the glittering glowing in the forest,¹

Those all caps in your postscript make it—me—sound so ominous. The black hole part might explain why I loved astronomy and cosmology as an undergrad, even if I couldn't quite get my head around the math.

I think the Headlands text² I wrote began to get at why I write what I write, and how I write about what I write. The timing (c. 2010) was perfect because I had been writing art criticism long enough to catch my breath and try to figure out what I had been doing. Another five years have passed, and it's time to take stock again.

I think most of what I write—about 95% of which is ostensibly “about” an individual artist—is a kind of “getting to know you” (as I titled my text on/for Roy³), a bumping up of my “project” against someone else's “project” and seeing what it makes. (Maybe that's my version of tribadism—which I want to extend into “try-it-it-ain't-bad-ism.”) Which is often oblique. (The two columns of the Hawkins text—titled “Portals,” incidentally or not—might diagram this in a quite literal way.) But it also explains my increased attraction to the epistolary, which is a form I've used for at least three catalogue texts in recent years, explicitly written to artists who are my “subject,” though on a few occasions I've also used the second person as a mode of address. And when writing in the third person, I've often used the artist's first name, to convey a proximity rather than a false scholarly distance. I'm intrigued by critical distance, but more often by the lack of it.⁴

I spend most of my time writing trying to identify and articulate what artists do, usually governed by word counts and deadlines. (Likewise, I perform similar work often in my students' studios.) I'm now very eager, in a rather selfish way, to think about what my “project” is—I try to avoid that word “practice,” which always sounds so professionalized and tidy. To describe my engine and how it works. (And I'm actually beginning to read Simondon on engines, if you're wondering where this trope is coming from.⁵ It's also coming from J.P. Gorin on Manny Farber—i.e., “The Farber Machine”—which is J.P. taking Farber's termite and letting in chew on Deleuze and Guattari to see what frass po(o)ps out.) You will also not be surprised to hear I'm fond of Henri Michaux's notion of “a contraption for which there is no manual.”) Some of this follows from and extends a lecture I gave in my “Routine Pleasures” class in 2012, which I've attached here if you're interested.⁶

I'm hoping my text for the “Routine Pleasures” exhibition (the termite text) gets me closer to making sense of it—if not also making it make sense to those who are reading me and paying attention. A user's manual, or a way of thinking about art and making that is more readily legible. At least, fingers x'ed.

xxM

On Tue, Mar 10, 2015 at 12:19 AM, CANDICE LIN <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Dear Michael,

I enjoyed that “lecture” so much I even took notes. Unworking at work! In fact today was thoroughly enjoyable because it was a day full of resistance to work, wonderfully generative feeling, though directed to no particular end. It started out by waking up and reading, something I rarely do but is a great pleasure of mine. To wake up alone, have a good cup of tea and sip it slowly while reading a book solely for pleasure, mmm. I almost always end my evenings with a few hours of reading, but to wake and read is a rare treat. And then writing to you was a nice beginning of my computer time, which then devolved into writing just to write, further thoughts on the nomenclature of plants, and then writing to Valdivia, watching an amazing Russian animation about mushrooms that Raimundas sent me and then more reading. Then I went shopping! and bought: edible flowers, sprouts, soaps and chocolate for a care package for my friend (whose dad died, I was telling you about), and spent awhile sniffing things in the health and beauty section of Whole Foods.⁷ I picked up my Thai bugs at the post office which had a line so long and slow it was defying even my defiance of deadlines ticking.⁸ Then I went home to make a rice bowl landscape, with the purple rice as the earth, the lavender leaves as little miniature ferns, Romanesque florets as trees, and a salmon building with crispy salmon skin roof.

I like how your lecture was like W.G. Sebald with its fitting but not explanatory images, each so perfect in its own way, and so nicely wide. I love the idea of resistance as an affirmation not a hostility. Can I argue that, similarly, my provoking nature and my tendency to tactlessly say the wrong thing comes out of a desire for intimacy rather than a desire to offend? Being a Capricorn and all (I know how you resent us⁹), I can’t help being fully invested in my values of productivity, and even the aesthetics of productivity are so alluring—whose studio is that with the beautiful mess on p. 32? But I also love how you take Calarts to task for its weird issue with intuition.

I wrote this today after writing to you, about intuition:

Before Linnaeus’s system was voted into being, there was a brief moment where botanists and scientists considered universalizing the Quechua language as the language of botany. In that Indigenous language, plants were said to have been named for their medicinal or folkloric properties, giving future botanical scholars more direct knowledge: by learning the name, they learned the function, or at least, its human relation—the plant’s possible use, rather than using an arbitrary system of signs. This proposed system, like the pictographic origins of the Chinese language, would short circuit the Saussurian idea of the sign as a pathway traced between referent, signified, and signifier. For example, according to Joseph de Jussieu’s records the Cinchona tree (commonly known as quina for the quinine extracted from it) used for treating malaria was known in Quechua as Yaracucchu Carachucchu, yara translates as tree, cara bark, and chucchu the

shivering of a patient suffering from malaria. Others use the Quechua name quinquina, for which the translation has been lost, and from which we get the word quinine. In this Quechua system, plants could arguably be fully intuitive if we believe that sounds for language arise intuitively not arbitrarily, the way Aghhhh is the sound of unexpected pain or accident, and Ohhh is the sound of unexpected pleasure.¹⁰

Being thought-writing, I'm quite sure there are many facts that are not quite right (I don't think I've read Saussure since 2001 and don't really remember shit about it but it came to mind intuitively, so... you know) and I like the idea of a mythology of how language came to be as an intuitive tracing of onomatopoeia.

I also really like your definition of project and its list (which seems like a self-portrait of you?): entropy, kindness, chance encounters, masculinity embodied in the male experience (okay maybe not so much this one), the anus as locus of the unconscious and base desire.

Maybe I was channeling Lee Lozano when I screamed at you in all caps. I always think of *The World According to Garp* (blow jobs in cars)¹¹ and CA Conrad when I see all caps. In the menstruation forum, somebody wrote, "I think no amount of blood will make him bind to you if you shout at him like you shout at us. Writing in all caps means shouting. Why you shout?" (I'm paraphrasing from edible menstrual blog memory¹² actually; I can't find the actual quote, but you get the idea.)

oh, and I also masturbated three times! best way to resist work, affirmatively.¹³

writing to you is a close second. (two in one day)

xx,c

On Mar 10, 2015, at 1:01 PM, Michael Ned Holte <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Okay, enough teasing. I need to see the rice bowl landscape. In the spirit of reciprocity, this (attached) was today's "project," which is to say unworking, in addition to cleaning in preparation for the city inspector. Do you eat the rice bowl landscape after it's constructed and—I assume—photographed¹⁴? Cooking is surely in the top two or three ways to resist work, affirmatively. Your top pick is hard to argue.

Sounds like you had a good Monday, productive and productively unproductive. My Mondays tend to be a lot more fun these days because I'm not teaching my Monday night class this semester. (And I get most of the day to myself.) It makes the middle of the week too much a pileup, but I'm usually recovered from that and the weekend...

I'm jealous of how much time you devote to reading. I always want to read more, but can never seem to get to it. (Well, I tend to reread a lot, especially stuff I assign for class.)¹⁵ I lack discipline. A residency would help get me a little more caught up. I'm already

preparing a little list of things I need to read/reread¹⁶ this summer with hopes that MacDowell will come through.¹⁷

I hadn't thought of Sebald in relation to my lecture, but of course you're right. The lecture on the project came about a month or less after the *La Jetée* lecture.¹⁸ I like that format a lot.¹⁹ (Similarly, I hope to return to the format of my Headlands text for the termite writing—an accumulation of microessays.) Have I mentioned I like to read aloud in class? It's something Bruce Hainley always did a lot of, and it rubbed off, though he never got into Powerpoint. But I love it.

By the way, the beautiful mess—indeed!—is Joe Brainard's studio.

Oh, and I thought you'd appreciate this quote I just encountered from Jean-Pierre Gorin, which you'll find amusing since you already know I'm a communist and we were talking about machines (well, engines): “You can't understand Marx if you don't see that this guy describing the capitalist machine was jerking off all the time. He loved putting all the elements together, and it's very important to love what you're doing.”²⁰

Aghhhhs & Ohhhs,

M²¹

¹ [M.] We (re)enter our conversation *in media res*, but that seems to make sense in our case. And it seems like we got to the “media” pretty quickly, right? You chose this particular volley, but it strikes me as perfectly exemplary of our ongoing correspondence. But for the sake of our assumed readers, who will encounter this exchange out of context, I wonder if I should include here my letter to the curators of this exhibition, responsible for this accompanying (online) publication that prompted this extraction of our correspondence. By the end of that sentence, I'm no longer wondering. Here it is, in its entirety:

Dear Jamie [Nisbet, Suzanne Hudson, and Simon Leung],

Candice and I have been discussing our collaboration for *Ours is a City of Writers*, and how we'd like to contribute to the publication (whether online and/or print) and the exhibition. Both opportunities allow us to extend our ongoing conversation of the past few years. (Some of it has happened in person, but it has also played out via email exchange—and it is, of course, the latter that is preserved.) Part of the appeal of working with Candice in this context is that we have an ongoing conversation that is remarkably generous, generative, and fulfilling, but it is one that has never been turned into “work”—meaning an externalized form intended to be consumed by an audience. We have in fact characterized our conversation as a kind of *unworking*, one that has thus far remained “off the books.”

Allow me to trot out a favorite quote from Barthes, one that elegantly frames this dilemma:

“I delight continuously, endlessly, in writing as in perpetual production, in an unconditional dispersion, in an energy of seduction which no legal defense of the subject I fling upon the page can any longer halt. But in our mercantile society, one must end up with a work, an *oeuvre*: one must construct, i.e., *complete*, a piece of merchandise. While I write, the writing is thereby at every moment flattened out, banalized, made guilty by the work to which it must eventually contribute.” (Roland Barthes, 1975)

By participating in this exhibition, we also risk, in some sense, converting our unworking into a kind of *object*, though we hope to narrowly avoid that outcome—to participate while avoiding “flatten[ing] out” or “banaliz[ing]” our unrushed but intensive engagement. In short, we will continue to resist Barthes's sense of “complet[ion].”

Alongside that, it is important to note that we have also assiduously avoided the usual expectations of relationship between “critic” (or “curator”) and “artist,” which often perpetuate familiar binaries, hierarchies, and power dynamics. Our dialogue is a decidedly non-hierarchical one. We hope to maintain this dynamic, and understand this exhibition—one that seeks to “suggest the range of possibilities within our broad community” of artists and writers—as an opportunity to locate our ongoing conversation as a compelling possibility.

Now, the specific proposal:

For the publication, we would like to include an archived excerpt of our email exchange from March 9-10, 2015. We would like to further annotate this, given that many of the references point outside the immediate conversation and that our “work” (meaning the more tangible stuff) has followed quite directly from this exchange. This, in its raw (and not-yet-annotated) form, is attached.

For the exhibition, we would like to continue our email exchange, which will occur over the course of the exhibition, intermittently, at its own pace. (We have discussed this exchange in relation to Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton’s *12 Dialogues, 1962-1963*, which were conducted on a shared typewriter, though there are other epistolary precedents we are thinking about too.) The tangible part of this “work” will include a [redacted] fax [redacted] [machine] placed on a desk situated in the gallery. With this, we intend to print these exchanges remotely, as we email each other. When the paper is printed out, it will be, if just barely, visible to a curious viewer. There is no expectation that the printout will be handled or even read. Once a new email arrives, we ask that the previous printout gets removed and recycled. We would like to work with the curators to determine the best placement of the desk, as well as clarifying the technical and procedural aspects of the printing.

Our work, so to speak, is tentatively titled *Off the Books*.

Cheers,

Michael with Candice

[C.] I would add that our normal correspondence begins somewhat formally, Dear Michael or Dear Candice and that it is only on occasion that you or I respond by addressing the other in reference to something which was said previously, in this case, the English translation of my Chinese name. [M.] Your Chinese name could not be more appropriate!

² [M.] *Drift of Summer*, 2010 (unpublished).

³ [M.] “Getting to Know You,” in *Roy McMakin: When is a chair not a chair?* (Skira/Rizzoli, 2010).

⁴ [C.] I would argue that we both share an interest in a lack of critical distance but that in you, it takes the form of this curious, generous, cat-like patience and careful observation usually directed towards older men... your “daddy issues” as you say, which includes daddies such as Pauline Oliveros, but also Charles Gaines and Roy and Richard. But in myself, it manifests perhaps less generously (especially if I’ve been drinking) as a slightly mean-spirited jab—my own familial learned behavior of forging intimacy and closeness which I mention in my response email. I think that this lack of distance and a quite purposeful disinterest in “professionalism” in both of us has allowed our friendship to become whatever enjoyable, procrastinatory pleasure it has become. I really can’t imagine a taboo subject between us! What a rare openness that is, especially now as we are bounded in other relations of professionalism to each other. This new unplanned for context for our correspondence makes me stretch defiantly into this purposeful unprofessionalism, especially when I think about mutual students or colleagues reading our correspondence exposed in this way, and its inclusion of things like the taxonomy of my masturbation and perversities. But I guess a lot of those are left out of this “selection.” And nobody is really going to read this, right? [M.] Right!

⁵ [M.] I never got around to actually reading Simondon—on engines or anything else, though I did read a short essay by Deleuze on Simondon. Maybe knowing one’s project is also knowing what *isn’t* one’s project, and enforcing those boundary lines.

⁶ [M.] “(Some Notes Toward the Question of the Project),” Powerpoint lecture, December 6, 2012, unpublished and no longer attached to this conversation.

⁷ [M.] I like the image of you smelling the merchandise at Whole Foods. It occurred to me that your interest in the olfactory is somewhat atypical in this field of “visual arts.” But, you are surely an atypical artist. That’s a compliment.

⁸ [M.] I think I like this image of you at the post office waiting for a shipment of bugs even more than I like the image of you at Whole Foods. It suddenly reminds me that I bought a package of novelty bugs for you at a natural history museum gift shop while traveling, maybe a year ago already—I can’t remember the flavor, but it was something ridiculous, like Flamin’ Hot or maybe Cool Ranch—but I never gave them to you. And I will now have to see if I can find them. [C.] I’m excited to receive them whenever they reappear on the scene. Perhaps the flavor could be enhanced by some dehydrated blood powder?

⁹ [M.] “Resent” sounds so nasty. But I do think I am astrologically predisposed to give goats a hard time. (Not that I really know. That’s just my intuition... ha.) But, goats and rams do apparently have a very different relationship to work—i.e., goats work all the time, and I spend most of my time, uh, *preparing* to work. [C.] You know, I had never thought about how similar the astrological animals were... now I’m wondering is this a gendered thing. The nimble feminized goat working steadily up the rocky mountain / the tough-headed masculine ram putting its head down and preparing to plow its way through the mountain with sheer force? But in that case, you are surely much more like a goat than a ram! [M.] I’ve learned some goatly tricks, but you’re still more likely to see me ramming my head against things as I move through the world. Maybe I’m a feminized ram—though definitely not a nimble one, physically speaking.

¹⁰ [C.] Reading through our correspondence, I recently took this writing on plants and onomatopoeia and used it in a text piece in the show at Commonwealth and Council (along with a reference to your hair, our correspondence, our first meeting, and our mutual appreciation of *La Jetée*—there are no secrets here, though maybe we should print the footnotes VERY SMALL). That and this “project” (although I think “practice” also sounds so unmastered and unperfect, project does have a nice unpretentious, kiddish ring to it) makes me feel a little cynical about the possibility of truly free modes of pleasure and unworking if all the previously procrastinatory, enjoyable writing I did to you is ultimately easily co-optable as productive work, but... the pleasure remains intact. I guess at the end of the day I think the strict divisions between productive and unproductive, working and unworking, are maybe less interesting, and certainly less tenable, than the usual blurriness of living and being interested in recurrent things in different contexts. [M.] Bottom petting! (Note to editor: VERY SMALL footnotes is indeed a good idea.)

¹¹ [M.] Your references to “pop culture” are always funny and surprising given that you were so deprived from the stuff as a child. [C.] Well, hey, what can I say, it was assigned reading at my Catholic high school. That’s mostly where I soaked up the little drips of pop culture I did manage to get.

¹² [M.] I will confess I still have no idea what an “edible menstrual blood memory” is, but it’s a remarkable string of words. [C.] I wish I could find the original url that I was referring to as it was an amazing thread of group writing expressing various opinions on how someone could feed another person their menstrual blood or urine or semen for magical spell-work. One example involved dehydrating menstrual blood to create a powder that one sprinkled

on popcorn or potato chips and fed to another person, with the ritualistic intent of making that person love the bleeder. I was inspired by this to buy a dehydrator but so far I have only made sauerkraut powder, pickle powder, black garlic powder, kale powder, cricket powder, and kimchi powder. [M.] Well, sign me up for pickle powder.

¹³ [C.] Although, I will admit, sometimes with the way I masturbate, I inadvertently give myself the beginning of a UTI (urinary tract infection) and have to remember to drink tall glasses of water and a handful of 500mg cranberry pills, which makes it go away quite immediately. But still... quite a lot of work, and not so relaxing. But that's usually when the "excessive" masturbation is related to avoiding other stress in my life and it's the internalization of stress as much as the physical repeated acts that cause the almost-infections.

¹⁴ [C.] You assume wrong! I have an aversion to photographing things or being photographed, you ought to know that. [M.] By now, I do know that! What a difference a year makes.

¹⁵ [C.] I have definitely read a lot less and reread a lot more since beginning teaching at Calarts, so I think it's a fair place to put the blame, rather than your "lack of discipline," which I really doubt you think you lack. I have no idea how you get as much unworking and working done within such a compact amount of time, certainly not by a lack of discipline. [M.] I have a similar wonder about you.

¹⁶ [C.] What was in this little list of things to read/reread? I just made one recently for myself for the new upcoming year. Curious to know what yours was back then or is now. [M.] I suspect if I could find it, it would include many of the texts that ended up in the endnotes of my "Termite's Advance" essay. But, I tend to do better keeping track of what I did than I do keeping track of what I have intended to do. But, since the election I've been wanting to read and re-read Walter Benjamin, who was always a prescient analyst of the current cultural climate. I've also been wanting to re-read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, which I haven't read since I was an undergrad. Likewise, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*. And re-reading this correspondence, I am tempted to return to Sebald. How about you?

¹⁷ [M.] It didn't come through! I spent a week in the High Desert and three weeks with my mom instead. And got a lot of writing done. So, if [redacted] MacDowell.

¹⁸ [M.] "Splicing Time: Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, from memory (a work in progress)," Powerpoint lecture, October 3, 2012, unpublished.

¹⁹ [C.] I realize in reading our correspondence now that some of my recent performative uses of the Powerpoint lecture come from rethinking its possibilities through the lectures you've shared with me. [M.] Microsoft should give me a kickback for my evangelical prowess.

²⁰ [C.] This quote is perhaps the most perfect attempt at a reconciliation of our languages and interests. Speak my orgasmic language and I'll listen to a leetle bit of Marx. [M.] A leetle Marx is good for you. Maybe you can take it in powder form?

²¹ [C.] Maybe end with a recomposed list of all the food we mention in our emails?

Meat glue

Grain swag

Desiccated vegetables

Pork fat

Duck prosciutto

Corn

Old woman's spit

Children

Resulting dough ball

Worm snack

Worm jerky

Lesbian sandwich

And/or ceviche course

Lamb meatballs

Wild mustard vodka

Shaved fish jerky

Pickled serrano chili

Foraged wild nettles

Not/Gross beer

Mulberries

Pickled cave