

Bad Followers

By Sharon Mizota

For many writers and artists there is nothing more daunting than the blank white page or blank white studio wall. The exhilaration of knowing that anything is possible is matched only by the terror of knowing that anything is possible.

In the course of a conversation about creative process, artist Gina Osterloh and I agreed that we are most creative when we have well-defined limits. These might be as mundane as a budget or a word count, the size of a wall or the dictates of a house style. Or they might be more complex: a particular question to address or a theme to interpret. It doesn't matter whether these parameters come from outside or from ourselves: we just need a starting point, something against which to react.

It's easier for an art writer. There is always art to which one can respond, and it comes with a context—historical, social, aesthetic—that needs to be inhabited, if only temporarily. There is usually a certain amount of space to be filled. For an artist, it is thornier: there are so many directions to pursue, so many choices. Yet for both, there is that blankness. Sometimes you just want someone to tell you what to do.

Of course, this desire is dangerous. Many an atrocity (aesthetic or otherwise) has been committed in the name of following orders. At best, it's a desire tinged with desperation and even masochism, running counter to vaunted mythologies of the artist as a free spirit. But there's no such thing as total freedom. Even the wildest work of art is a negotiation with the powers that be.

Gina and I are both fans of the conceptual art of the 1960s, when many artists stopped making objects in favor of ephemeral performances, textual scores or instructions for other people to follow. This impulse, which art critic Lucy Lippard documented extensively in her 1973 book, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, dates back, as most things in conceptual art do, to Marcel Duchamp. In 1919, he sent a wedding present to his sister, Suzanne, in the form of instructions telling her to hang a geometry textbook on the balcony of her home until it was torn apart by the elements. Nature got its revenge on our attempts to organize it into neat little figures, and modern art-as-instruction was born.

Duchamp's gift was in keeping with the irreverent, irrational ethos of Dada, which was itself a reaction to the disillusionment unleashed by the chaos of World War I. In the 1960s, artists took up these strategies again in alignment with countercultural movements for human and civil rights, feminism, pacifism, and as a protest against capitalism. Art, they asserted, should be liberatory, not a bourgeois product. In our current cultural moment, as basic human dignity is assailed with increasing virulence and impunity, this belief takes on renewed resonance. Possibly, it is in issuing and adhering to constraints that we find art's emancipatory potential once again.

Art as instruction was and is a way of democratizing the creative process. Anyone who follows the instructions can be the artist; the work can be made in many different places, times and situations. There is no “original” so to speak, and the results are always acts of interpretation. Rather than a discrete object, the work is a free-floating idea, often communicated through writing.

Of course, this doesn’t prevent artists and gallerists from selling documentation of such performances or from asserting copyright over the written instructions. There is no escape from the pressure cooker of capitalism, but every now and then we have to let off some steam. In this tiny aperture, artists become writers, and in a small way, activists.

For this exhibition about the relationship between art and writing, it seemed appropriate to select works by such artist-writers and let them tell us what to do. We are not alone in this enterprise: instructions-as-art have proliferated throughout the art world in recent years. Artists such as Koki Tanaka, Erwin Wurm, Mads Lynnerup and Gillian Wearing have all engaged with variations on the form, following or writing (in Wurm’s case, illustrating) instructions as part of their work. But no one has been more dedicated to the form than curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. His exhibition of instruction- or score-based art, “Do It,” has been traveling the globe in various incarnations since 1993. Gina and I are indebted to [the online version](#), created in collaboration with e-flux, for many of the instructions featured in our installation.

For “Tell me what to do (results may vary),” Gina has interpreted these works as images; I’ve responded to them with words. We gave ourselves some additional parameters. All responses fit within an 8” x 10” format, a standard size for photographic prints, which is Gina’s primary medium. My responses are all less than 250 words, the length of a standard capsule review.

These limits gave us a scaffolding that freed us to focus on the instructions themselves. Although they may have emerged from a democratizing impulse, instructions are by nature authoritarian. Even the most whimsical examples assert superior knowledge and carry the expectation of obeisance. Artists may have uncoupled ideas from the tradition of skilled object-making, but they ended up issuing orders instead. In “following” them, we give up some of our autonomy.

But what if we are bad followers? Language is a notoriously slippery beast. Words that at first seem like simple and unambiguous orders keep opening onto vistas that their authors may or may not have intended. Ideas, transmitted from one person to another, or from one generation to another, are rendered by different bodies in different places under different circumstances from the ones in which they were conceived. Interpretation is always creative, and making art is always a form of reading. Results may vary. What matters is the power to take things into our own hands. If we remember this, perhaps we’re all a little more free.