

M i c h a e l N e d H o l t e

3 May 2011

Dear Jesse and Brian,

An invitation is a blessing and a curse. I had hoped to respond to your prompt for a text to accompany your show at Las Cienegas Projects with something brilliant. Instead, as the deadline arrives, I am instead offering you an apology.

It's not as if I didn't have good intentions—I did and still do.

My conversation with you in early January (over those delicious crêpes) was invigorating: Your approach to the show in question is smart, funny, and playful. I'm very excited about the way you're pressing hard on the accepted limits of authorship. You might even be crossing an imaginary line with what you're calling "exhibition design" on the gallery's website, though I suspect the artists you've assembled are complicit with the tactics in play.

I'm particularly empathetic with your approach following the experience of "Support Group," my own curatorial project from last year. In some ways, your show is an inverse of mine: I willfully surrendered as much control as possible to the artists I invited to be in the show (Kathryn Andrews, Gaylen Gerber, and Mateo Tannatt—along with over a dozen artists invited into the show by Mateo, beyond my jurisdiction), and you, on the other hand, are asserting your control at the very end. (I suppose your sense of authorial control is closely related to the work of an editor.) I devised a curatorial framework which allowed for me to be surprised by the final outcome of the show; you have an opportunity to surprise (and perhaps offend?!) the artists you've invited. See, it's the blessing and curse thing.

So, I really thought I would use this occasion to write something that would work elegantly but perhaps perversely alongside your show. My first impulse was to redeploy the "frequently asked questions" format that I first used for my show "Laying Bricks" at Wallspace in 2007. I had resisted writing the sort of curatorial statement that usually accompanies an exhibition by a "guest curator"—in other words a statement that says way too much and forecloses the possibility that the objects in the show can produce a different kind of text altogether. (Wait a second: Are you hoping my text will provide a necessary clue for "unlocking" the secret of your show? Are you unconsciously hoping I will spill your beans?) Finally, I used the FAQ as a way of interrogating myself, and my premises, as critically as possible. But I also tried to stay critical of the need for a curatorial statement in the first place. (I asked myself, "Why wasn't there a real essay written to accompany the exhibition?") To which I answered, "The exhibition organizer"—I used to avoid taking the title "curator" for myself; an even longer story—"posits that a gallery show might in fact mirror an essay (though in a gallery the organization of signs is more clearly spatial than temporal). Hence, he posits that an essay about the show might be redundant." So, there you go.

A few months after that show, Vincent Honoré contacted me to contribute a text to the catalogue for his show “Past Forward” at the Zabłudowicz Collection. In fact, he said I could simply reprint my FAQ piece rather than write a new text, but I immediately felt that the text for my show would be inappropriate for his show; instead, thinking site-specifically, it should instead respond to the context of his show. So, for Vincent’s catalogue I wrote an FUQ—a “Frequently Unasked Questions” that allowed me to be cranky about the so-called art world at that particular moment (high value targets but also fish in a barrel) and interrogate some of Vincent’s premises too. Thankfully, he was a good sport about it.

As much as I try to avoid repeating myself in these situations, I thought a similar tactic might work for your show, but it didn’t... for reasons that I’d prefer to avoid talking about. So, I pursued alternate approaches.

First, I started a Mad Libs-style text titled “The Neologist Manifesto (First Draft),” and thought the notion of filling in blanks was perfectly appropriate to your show, but then it felt too much like an exercise.

Next, I laid the groundwork for a “Glossary of Received Ideas,” inspired of course by Flaubert’s famously scabrous “Dictionary of Received Ideas,” but aimed at the language and mores of contemporary art. Entries included words such as “Biennale” (“It’s been two years already?”), “Mid-Career” (“Neither new (and therefore scintillating) nor old (and therefore venerable); and therefore a fate worse than death, but also a reminder that death is just around the corner. As seen in the phrase ‘mid-career survey exhibition.’”), “Performance” (“Said, sighing: ‘He/she stole my act.’”), and so on. Whether sensing the foul odor of mean-spiritedness of my endeavor or just the sheer inadequacy of my prose in comparison to Flaubert (duh!), I petered out before writing entries for “Ambitious,” “Curatorial Studies,” “Franco, James,” or “Participation.” You get the idea.

Now, at the end of my proverbial rope, I’m back where I began: uncertain how a text might accompany this exhibition (or any exhibition, for that matter), unclear about the peculiar “task of the critic” in this guise. (One might argue an invitation to write a text immediately disarms a critic’s most critical faculties.) In this case my hesitation results from the simple fact that I can’t even imagine what your show will look like, or how it will work. I mean, I think I have a pretty good sense of your basic curatorial gesture, but I have no idea what it will be in practice—what it will produce. (Flaubert on “practice”: “superior to theory.”)

The roster of artists you’ve chosen is eclectic, but I have a hard time seeing them all together... in my head. Which is part of my point: Only you could have imagined these artists occupying the same space and time. Maybe that’s your point, too? Of course your show is (I’m making an educated guess here) not an effort to define a movement or a stylistic tendency. It’s driven by extracurricular concerns. It’s extravisual, you might say, though I suspect looking—and looking again—will be a significant aspect of the viewer’s engagement. The “extra-” is really where the show begins, which probably means this epistolary text (a supplement) is both superfluous and entirely appropriate at the same time.

With apologies,