

ARTFORUM

ONLY CONNECT: THE ART OF B. WURTZ



AT SOME POINT, THINGS BECAME UNSECURED, hooks unable to reach the eyes--or no eyes at all but only hooks, jabbing blindly into anything. Hurt jabbing.

So much current art presents the viewer with a surplus of "personality," but personality faked. Well, perhaps not exactly faked, but too often sadly overwhelmed by the various cultural effluvia the artist deploys--cartoons, historical styles, goth monstrosities, Paris Hilton, etc.--supposedly to express "individuality" but which finally only intensifies a detached intimacy with whom- or whatever, a cold, brittle kind of connection born of alienation, risking and revealing very little (nothing at all perhaps) about anything or anyone.* How does any artist--any

person, even--find an eye for his or her hook in the inundation of the world, almost every bit of it commodified, mediated, copyrighted (whatever that means anymore)? If art can no longer convey any sense of self, however fractured, mutable, or diffuse, what's left for either?

It's a question of realism, in the sense Roland Barthes lays out when considering the impossibilities of the Marquis de Sade, explaining how "reality" and Sade's writing are "cut apart"--the latter not linked by any obligation to the former--and seeing the exciting power and importance of this. While "an author can talk about his work ad infinitum," the theorist observes, "he is never bound to guarantee it." Before reaching that libertine conclusion, however, Barthes first ponders (in a brief aside) a possible suturing of that cut, as well as some kind of guaranteeing rapprochement: "Why not test the 'realism' of a work," he asks, "by examining not the more or less exact way in which it reproduces reality, but on the contrary the way in which reality could or could or could not effectuate the novel's utterance? Why shouldn't a book be programmatic?"

Writing this in the aftermath of May 1968, and when Vietnam was bathing so much in a bloody aurora (perhaps not unlike the light in which you're reading now), Barthes saw in things "cut apart" both art and the imagination's liberation. Yet he paused to test realism not by how art reproduced the world but, paradoxically, by how the world might produce its unruly, fantastic ideal. Contemplating the programmatic as opposed to the prettily descriptive, he imagined art effectuating something in the world as a glowing sign of its realism and our reality (our realism and its reality). In other words, he was already seeing something like hooks jabbing, and how this effected any I.

In 1973, a young B. Wurtz made an ink-on-paper drawing using an elementary script. It read:

THREE IMPORTANT THINGS

1. SLEEPING
2. EATING
3. KEEPING WARM

B. WURTZ

JAN. 1973

Few would deny that sleeping, eating, and keeping warm are important, but why would anyone have to be told or reminded of it--especially as art? Only Douglas Huebler might have committed such a disarmingly simple observation to paper. Perhaps the anomalous lowercase-cursive penmanship is the first indication that things should be taken as they appear and then some. Arriving hot on the heels of a period when most artists using language would have deployed typewritten or printed text, Wurtz pops next door to borrow a cup of aesthetic sugar, producing something with the look of a shopping or to-do list, more like a note stuck to the fridge than anything Information-Conceptual art impresario Seth Siegelaub would have published. The decision to handwrite the text proffers not only the intimacy and nonprofessionalism of personal correspondence but also, as art, its style and associations. I like the abbreviation of the month, which clarifies that this isn't really the work of a child, but rather has been made by someone who knows that the choice between spelling out J-A-N-U-A-R-Y and abbreviating it results in different effects as well as different kinds of understanding. (When is the concept of abbreviation understood and expedient? ...