À tous les étages

by

Josh Morden

A thesis exhibition presented to the
Ontario College of Art & Design University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

OCADU Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond St. W.
April 14 - 17, 2011

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2011

Creative Commons Copyright Notice

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize the Ontario College of Art & Design to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

I further authorize the Ontario College of Art & Design to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

Signature _____

À tous les étages

Master of Fine Arts, 2011

Josh Morden

Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

Ontario College of Art & Design University

Abstract

The work of art, the gallery system, the history of art, and the social-cultural mantle which encloses and validates it all have long been regarded as separate entities which negotiate an ongoing collaborative relationship. However, this thesis contends that all formerly accepted limitations and structures of art can be disassembled to be repurposed as mutable and boundary-less raw materials of art practice. Simulating the mature career retrospective catalogue of the respected visual artist, Josh Morden problematizes these separate but correlating realms in order to pose the act of cultural production as a process of creative self-consumption. Authoring his own fame, interviews and mythology as a method to examine the psychological effect and intent surrounding the discourse of art, he creates a recursive document presenting himself as the focus of his research, examining the intent and accomplishments of his artistic practice from a fictive third-party perspective. Utilizing cannibalization and appropriation as praxial methods of artistic production, he explores the questions surrounding meaning, intent and the nature of the endgame in the creation and theorization of art.

A Note on the Text

The following work was conceived as a holistic artistic project. To that end, from this point forward, the thesis is organized in a manner befitting an exhibition catalogue, the format for which it was conceived.

À tous les étages

Josh Morden

À tous les étages

Josh Morden

Essays by Elizabeth Klemm, Geoffrey Sonnabend
and an interview by Arthur R. Rose

Edited By Emory Bortz

Published by The Lectern Press

Contents

Foreword

A work of art, on a wall. This represents a basic unit in the arts. Everything else emanates from this relationship. In one direction, the wall forms part of a gallery, which itself is part of a larger network of institutions, which together form the psychogeographic terrain of the art world. On the same axial plane are the inhabitants of this world: artists, critics, curators, educators, collectors, buyers and dealers. Along another axis the wall is a temporary site, a place that embraces the work after it has reached completion in the studio of an artist. The wall transitions the work to affirm its value for another more permanent "wall": a collector's inventory or a museum's vault. Yet even on conceptual terms, the work hanging upon a wall represents a capricious exchange, a totemic site challenged by artists and theorists alike, who dispute this common referent in the discourse of art. Under these circumstances, an analysis of the wall becomes integral to the iteration of the work of art. Indeed, the making of art reveals itself to be inseparable from the wall, the gallery and the academic, cultural and commercial institutions of art that are a spectral context no matter what form the work itself might take.

Together, the notional planes of work and wall are the medium of Josh Morden's practice. Bridging the gap between the production of the aesthetic object and its function within the larger art "environment," Morden's work redraws borders to situate scrutiny of the discourse of art within art. Looking beyond the artwork as a discrete object, Morden proposes that no piece is ever without a history from which it emerges, a space for its presentation, or the discussion that will surround it in the future to come. His methodologies accept these processes as integral to approaching the artwork and interpreting it.

An examination of his diverse practice, *À tous les étages* ("On all levels") seeks to chart the histories and causality that has informed his art practice. A simultaneous comment upon and insinuation within the culture of art, these pieces posit that neither individual nor institution is exempt from the scope, examination and critique of what up until now has been considered a finite, self-sufficient system of institutionalized cultural conventions. Making light of the ideologies and beliefs that drive the culture of art forward, Morden adopts a tongue-in-cheek approach to the commonly stoic discourse of the tortured artist and the omniscient institution. In confronting and problematizing these monolithic structures, Morden changes the ubiquitous question from the simple "What do we believe in?" to the infinity more complex "What if it wasn't true?"

B. Lynch Davis
Director

Retrospectation: The Art of Looking Back in the Work of Josh Morden

Elizabeth Klemm

On April 11th, 1975, Chris Burden began one of his artworks, *Doomed*, by lying down on the floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. As he positioned himself, he was watched by a crowd of over 400 curious people, all of them eager to see what an artist who had previously crawled through broken glass and had himself shot might do this time. Burden proceeded to confound the expectations of his audience. He stayed perfectly still for the next forty-five hours, resting beneath a sheet of glass canted against the wall, with a nearby clock counting off the hours of his vigil. What no one knew at the time was the purpose behind his actions. There was a certain irony to this, as a few days earlier he had been approached by the curators of the museum to divulge the length of his planned performance, so they might neatly fit it into their scheduling. Burden was taken aback by having his artwork considered in the same light as a museum tour or guest lecture, so he decided to leave the length up to the curators (but not let them know that this was to be the case). So, for those forty-five hours he handed his artwork (and by extension, his life) over to the completely oblivious curators of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

As the rules he devised for the piece stipulated that the performance would end as soon as any outside force acted upon him or the components of his work, the work concluded when the curators placed a pitcher of water near his head. They did this out of a genuine fear for his life and not from any understanding that it was just such an intervention Burden had been waiting for. Once the pitcher was in place, he got up, retrieved a hammer and an envelope containing the thesis for the work, and broke the clock, marking the end of his performance. Burden's decisions regarding the rules of the artwork made the phalanx of curators the producers for those forty-five hours. They were the ones that held the capacity to control the boundaries of the piece, and by extension its thesis, even though they had no knowledge of their role in the piece's duration.[1]

These rules of execution stand as a parable to the concepts played out in the work of Josh Morden, although the artist does not identify as much with Burden the artist as he does with Burden's curators. In Morden's works, the concept that the originator of the content does not matter as much as the disseminator is of paramount concern, and from this vantage he relishes the dual role of critic and curator of the history of art and its exhibition. Take Morden's *Quixote* (2010) (p. 15), for example. Morden chooses as a starting point Sinclair Lewis's 1934 book *Work of Art*. An obscure novel published after Lewis won the Nobel Prize in 1930, *Work of Art* stands most succinctly as a monument to ego, displayed by an embossed notification of the Nobel Prize on its cover and spine in addition to the gilt signature

of Lewis himself. Morden takes this book and replaces Lewis's signature with his own, assuming the authorial role for this text. Aside from the obvious didactic humour in appropriating the "Work of Art," the piece brings up greater questions of authorial intent. As hinted at by the title, *Quixote* obtains its impetus from Jorge Luis Borges's *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, a story which proposes that the French author Pierre Menard's greatest opus was his word-for-word re-writing of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of part one along with a portion of chapter twenty-two of *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. Not meant as a straightforward translation or any other type of common copy, the re-writing occurred as a part of an attempt by Menard to fully occupy and assume the authority of Cervantes's psyche and intent.[2] In the re-authoring, Menard is posed by Borges as granting the reader a fresh vantage from which to undertake scholarship of the text, as a man of current time speaking in the metre and phrasing of Cervantes would be nothing short of an academic revelation. In the reattribution of the obscure *Work of Art*, Morden performs the same function, asking how the book would be interpreted if it were a contemporary novel divorced from the name and respect of a Nobel laureate.

A similar line of questioning goes on in Morden's series *Platitudes* (2010) (p. 19-22). Derived from Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (1983-85), *Platitudes* creates anagrams out of Holzer's original statements, then presents them using methods synonymous with Holzer's originals. The rearranged, reprocessed and remade phrases balance between representing the same sentiments as

the originals and subtly adulterating them, due to the inherent awkwardness in crafting anagrams from Holzer's short, terse phrases. By taking Holzer's work as the raw materials for his art, Morden interrogates where the power of the original texts lies: in the letters used or the phrases crafted. Although at first this may seem like a foolish question to ask, its analogue resides in the thesis of Conceptual Art, which placed value in the idea contained in a work of art, rather than in its material and factual existence. As a concept initiated to remove the cultural credence and value that was placed on physical art objects, Morden displays the irony in Holzer's conceptualist premise by deconstructing the idea which constituted the work and crafting a counterfeit which is in every metric equal to the original. *Platitudes* makes the case that, because every concept in Conceptual Art must at some point be expressed in a tangible form, it is just as susceptible to the corruptive influences to which previous forms of art have fallen prey.

The monolithic series produced by Morden, *Constant Agitation (after Mel Ramsden)* (2011) (p. 23), hints directly in its title to the artist's continued interest in the mechanics of conceptual art. In 1967-68, Mel Ramsden, a founding member of the English collective Art & Language, produced *Secret Painting*, a monochrome black canvas with an accompanying label:

> *The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist.*[3]

The work was meant to contend with the continual desire in the art world to interpret and demystify the work of art, and to have its concept and intent laid bare for the viewer. By conceptually negating the ability for any cultural faction to accomplish this, Ramsden attempted to interject an artist-controlled mysticism back into the production of art. In *Constant Agitation*, Morden undoes Ramsden's work by equating the monochrome canvas with the undeveloped film negative, hinted at by the reference notches along the top right of the canvas (a coding system used to identify sheet film), as well as the title itself ("Constant Agitation" is a direction one might encounter when developing film). In offering the conceit that the "secret painting" had the ability to be developed into a resolved image, Morden contends that no work of art could ever really break free from the cultural compulsion to have it deciphered. The title's directive, constant agitation, puns on the consternation that this revelation no doubt contributes to the search for absolutes in the artistic realm.

A similar game of give-and-take again plays out in Morden's *Silence, Exile, and Cunning* (2010) (p. 24). A limited series of editioned cards which reproduce the phrase "I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT," *Silence* provides a distinct answer to an ambiguous question. The work is performed when Morden silently hands the card out whenever he gets asked to discuss his art. Rather than offering a reply or even affecting a verbal rebuff, this premeditation undermines the seemingly spontaneous reaction printed on the card and demonstrates Morden's active

acknowledgement of the cultural expectations attached to the persona of an artist. In mechanically displaying the shyness and aversion commonly attributed as an organic trait of artistic personality, Morden reveals the intention with which many artists go about crafting their "unrehearsed" public presence. The disclosure of premeditation also finds emphasis in the title of the piece, a quote from James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-15), spoken as part of a discussion by the main character of the methodology with which he has planned out his life:

> *I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning.*[4]

The meaning exhibited by this quote is also paralleled when it is taken into account that both the performance enacted by Morden and the quote itself were both previously utilized by the author Don DeLillo, in similar situations of being asked to dissect or otherwise provide analysis of his work.[5] With this second level of reference placed into the work, the piece comes to represent the logical endpoint to the genesis of the portrayal of persona for the artist. Bereft of originality and created through a pastiche of past individuals, events and works, the artist can only move to commodify their personality by enforcing an artificial scarcity on its invocation.

As a concluding showcase for the concepts which inform Morden's analysis of the tenets that shape art, the series *No Title* (2010) (p. 28-33) stands as metonymic. What is ostensibly a collection of reproductions of artworks from art history texts, *No Title* subtly hints at the truth that any retelling of history is unique and does not adhere to a single immutable narrative. By excising the text from the pages, Morden leaves the works sitting as they would on a gallery wall, inviting the viewer to compare the scale, placement and quality of their reproduction. Allowing room for this examination makes the variable approach to the recounting of art history easy to see. At once a painting is devoted a full page in color or a thumbnail in monochrome, all at the discretion of the designers, authors and editors of the text.

Making light of the authority with which history is usually recounted, *No Title* reveals that each authorial choice contends with the others that have been made before it. This creates an allegory for the plurality of interpretations which are possible when commenting upon or presenting art, removing the potential for a single intrinsic judgement or reading to ever be made. Tying the greater themes behind Morden's work together, this sentiment denies a resolution in favour of leaving the question open. Thus, a case can be argued for the personal stake which Morden establishes in his work. As his critique dismantles the certainties implied in the art he uses as his references, it is easy to see his body of work as a canon of aesthetic mythology, formed to interrogate particular assumptions at play in the art world. However, identifying it as

such would be too simplistic. Rather, his mode of critique is a dexterous examination of how, in the act of defining any work of art, occasions for oppositional interpretations are always founded. Taking the breadth of art history as the materials for his practice, Morden assesses the ideological meanings behind art to remind us as that the collective striving towards theories of production do not guarantee that an unassailable answer is attainable.

Notes

1. Roger Ebert, "Chris Burden: 'My God, are they going to leave me here to die?'," *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 25, 1975.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of The Quixote," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 90.

3. Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 25.

4. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 181.

5. Don DeLillo, *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 6.

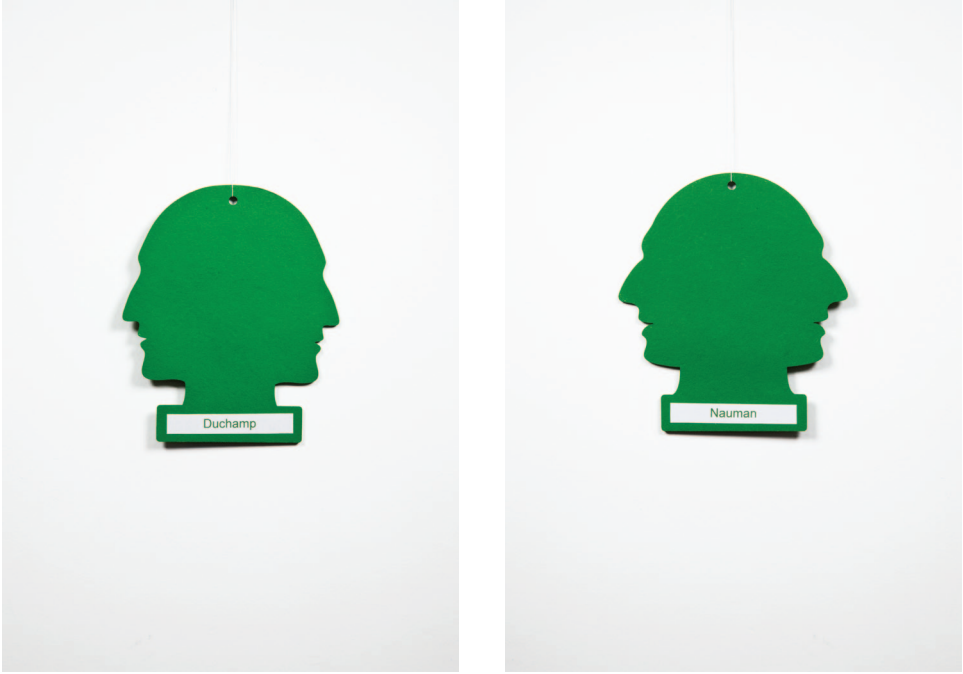
À tous les étages
(Works 2009-11)

Quixote, 2010
modified bookwork
7.75 x 5.25 inches | edition of 8
cat. no. 13

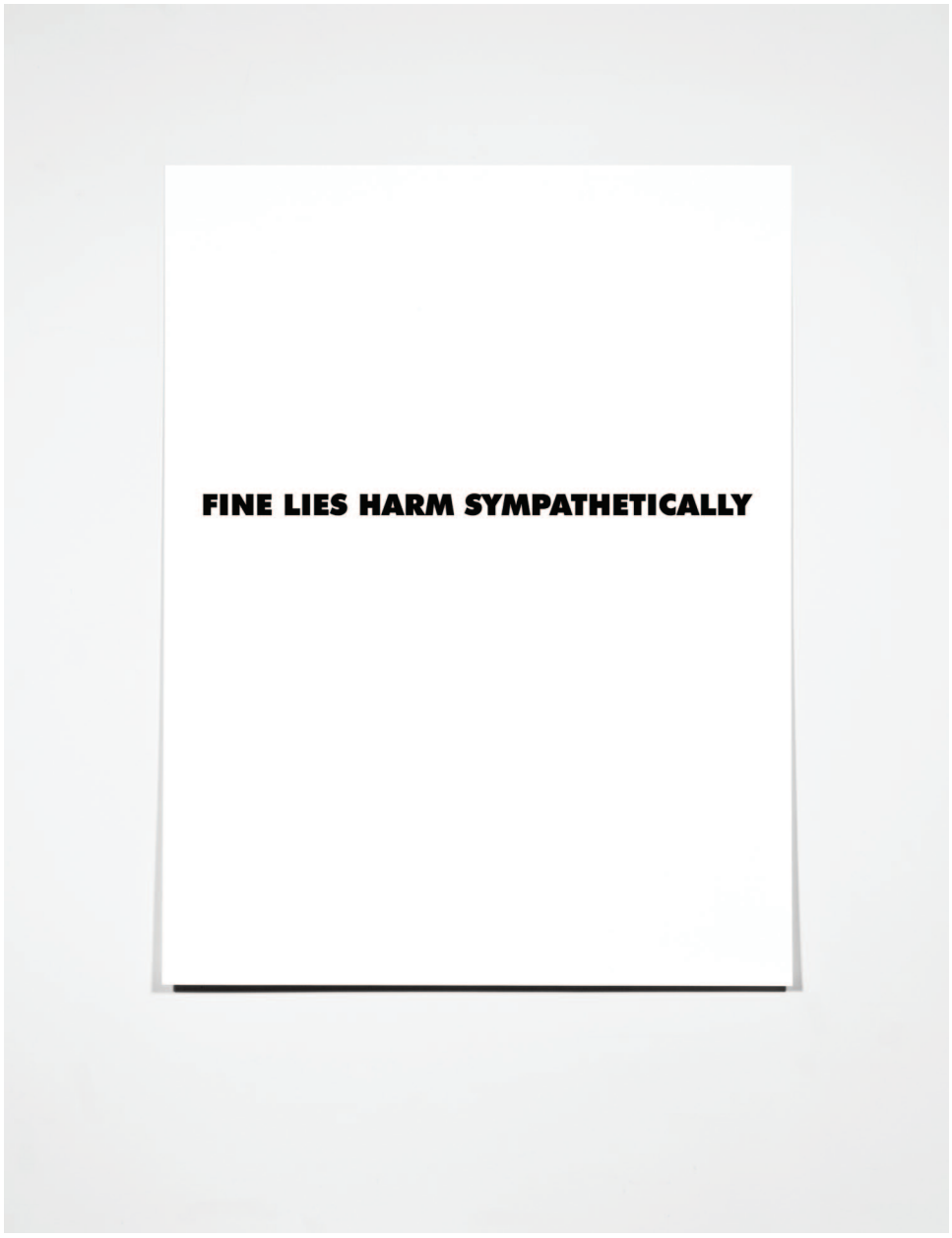
Without the Courage to End or the Strength to Go On, 2010
instructions | dimensions variable
cat. no. 19a

Without the Courage to End or the Strength to Go On, 2010
c-print | dimensions variable
cat. no. 19b

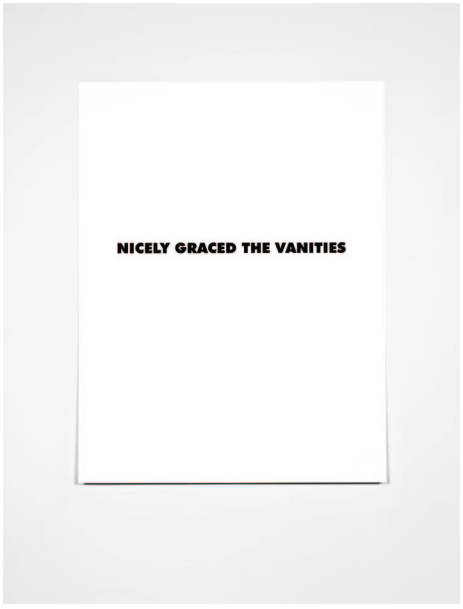
untitled, 2010
perfume impregnated cardstock | 4.75 x 4.25 inches
cat. no. 18



FINE LIES HARM SYMPATHETICALLY
from *Platitudes*, 2009
screenprint
20 x 16 inches | open edition
cat. no. 6



SUFFER SOMETHING IMAGINATION SEEKS
TO A SUBLIME HOMINESS
NICELY GRACED THE VANITIES
from *Platitudes*, 2009
screenprints
20 x 16 inches each | open edition
cat. no. 16, 17, 12



CHEERFUL CONTROLLERS MAIL DEATH
from *Platitudes*, 2009
pencils, envelopes, paper tags
various dimensions | open edition
cat. no. 2

LIABLE NAÏVE ENTITIES
from *Platitudes*, 2009
mousetrap
1.75 x 3.75 x .75 inches | open edition
cat. no. 11

Constant Agitation (after Mel Ramsden), 2011
oil on canvas | 30 x 24 inches
cat. no. 4

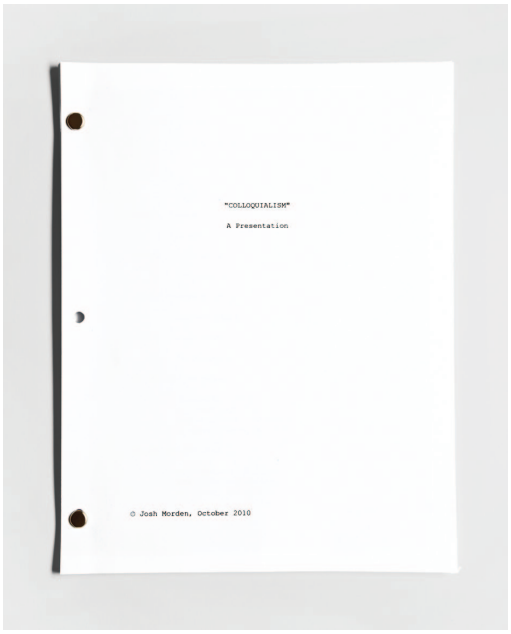
Silence, Exile, and Cunning, 2010
printed card and performance
2 x 3.5 inches | edition of 500
cat. no. 15

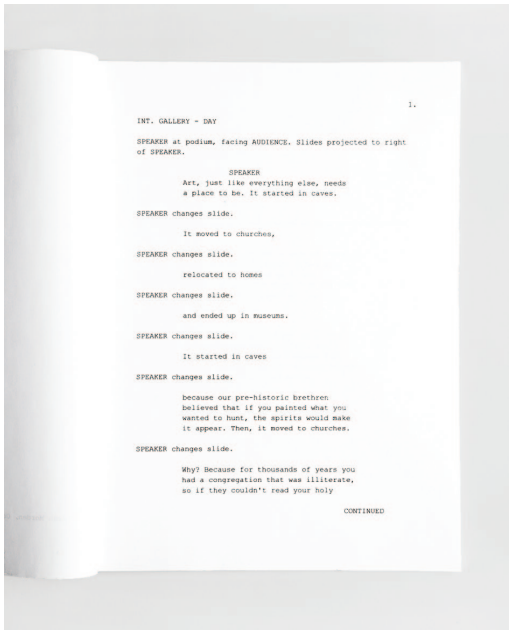
À tous les étages, 2011
artist book
11.5 x 9 inches | edition of 12
cat. no. 1

IMAGE FORTHCOMING

Audio Tour (Metropolitan Museum of, New York City), 2010
audio recording
2:37 min | edition of 5
cat. no. 14

Colloquialism, 2010
artist book
11 x 8.5 inches | edition of 7
cat. no. 3





No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC), 2011
5 c-prints
24 x 24 inches each | edition of 7
cat. no. 10, 5, 7, 9, 8

John Kissick, Art: Context and Criticism, Second Edition
(New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 60-61
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches | edition of 7
cat. no. 10

Erwin O. Christensen, The History of Western Art
(New York: The New American Library, 1959), 34-35
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches | edition of 7
cat. no. 5

Frederick Hartt, Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Volume I
(New York: Harry N. Abrams, inc., 1976), 136-137
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches | edition of 7
cat. no. 7

Jean Anne Vincent, History of Art: With Examination Questions and Answers, Second Edition *(New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1970), cover*
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches | edition of 7
cat. no. 9

Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, Gardner's Art Through the Ages, Sixth Edition
(New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), 184-185
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches | edition of 7
cat. no. 8

Interview:
Josh Morden in conversation with Arthur R. Rose

To begin, where does your work start? What interests you?

I am interested in worlds… in how they work. On interaction, and belief. Some art tries to create these worlds. But I think there is nothing more fascinating that what actually goes on. On making art about the real world.

What made you choose to focus on the art world in particular? It's very detached from the "real world," as you say.

Well, maybe that's why I chose it. It is so different from the real world, but it exists within it. It's like a cult where people can see things that no one else can see. There are rituals there, and there are relics. There's a magic. I love that, it's so fascinating.

Do you think art has an integral role in culture?

Art is a gift. I don't think it matters, really. It's there. It's pleasant. It's different. Isn't that enough? Does it have to be important? What is important?

I see your point.

Thank you. I want to make sure no one ever mistakes my work for something important. That would be the worst thing that could happen.

That's a unique way of putting it. What do you see yourself accomplishing through your art?

I want to capture reality, but my reality. All we ever know is what we see, and that is different for everybody. What I produce is what I see of the world.

What is your process for doing that?

I collect. I make lists, collections, mostly. I put things together. After they are together, I can see something new in them. That's where my work comes from. Monet made art by going out to the countryside, I go to museums and libraries. His subject matter was nature, art is mine.

You mentioned libraries. What role does language play in your art?

Oh, my relation to my work is very verbal. When people started to interpret the world, it was through pictures, but it was also through words. It's so common in culture. Everything gets reduced through language.

What sort of writers do you identify with?

I like anyone who is interested in the world, like I am. They're in the sciences, the arts, philosophy, engineering. I don't want to create distinctions. Distilling, studying the world, that's what I'm interested in.

Anyone in particular?

There are some artists, Marcel Broodthaers, Andrea Fraser, Brian O'Doherty, they were the first people I found who really started to dissect how art connected to the world, who saw it as something more than a benign, insulated structure. I really discovered friends in them. They spoke to what I was doing. Part of me was scared about this; I wanted to stop looking at them.

Why was that?

I thought they would prove I was unoriginal. I became terrified every time someone would mention another artist. I thought that person would destroy my work by having done it first.

Interesting. How did you cope with this?

Well, at some point I became consumed. I started to hunt out the work, to find all of it. I actually wanted to see my work destroyed. Then, I started to see the similarities in their

work as well. Robert Ryman, he could paint a white square. Malevich could as well. Martin, Antrios, they all could. But it was though each one was different somehow. I realized if they could, why couldn't I?

Did this shift have anything to do with your move towards appropriation?

Yes, why not? If nothing anyone else was doing was really original, why couldn't I take advantage of that? So yes, I started to really get into appropriation.

With your usage of appropriation, a question of authorship does arise. Do you see yourself as the artist who creates your work, even though it is so heavily borrowed from other artists?

You know, I like that term authorship. I can say that I see myself as an author. Authors never have anything new to work with, in essence. They have to use the same language that everyone else before them has used. Only their perspectives might be new. But even then, their ideas have to be expressed using that same language. I believe the same happens visually. Everything that could be done already has. All that can happen is to bring new concepts to it, and to make them using the images that already exist.

Interesting…

It's like photography. A photographer can never create something new, they can only reproduce what is already there. But they can frame it in a new way, they can create a new juxtaposition. I do the same. I appropriate like a photographer does.

So you see your work as transcription?

No, no, I hope it's something more than that. In transcription, errors are made. Those errors are my art. Like I said, my work is bartering between trying to describe art… to describe the world, and where the faults are with doing that. Where things don't always line up correctly.

There seems to be a thread of degradation in your work.

There is a certain poeticism to the moment when the systems that we were brought up on fall apart. I think that that is a natural part of art, to have agreed upon systems cast aside. That's how new movements are made.

Speaking of movements, do you see your work as being part of Postmodernism?

Part of it is, naturally, but I think I've moved beyond that. Postmodernism took copying as a overt method of creation, the thesis presenting its product. I think my work suggests

that that methodology is just a part of the process. Integral and natural, just not the only end product. I hope I've moved past the concerns of the postmodernists, gotten to something else.

What do you believe you are doing?

Most of what I'm doing is restructuring reality. Putting it into orders others haven't thought of. It's a natural by-product of my process, ordering and collecting. In that way, Id consider more of my work accidental rather than intentional. Like I said, errors in transcription, even my own.

Getting back to language, you said you relate to your work verbally. How does description enter into your process?

Description? I don't like description. I'd rather leave things open to interpretation. There is a symbiosis in art, between creation and dissection, and as an artist I'd rather stay on the creation side. I'll leave it to other people to dissect my work. I feel it's too easy for an artist to negate their work by unravelling it. If they can explain it so thoroughly, why did they go to the trouble of making it? They could have just written something. Making something gives no real privilege of insight towards it, so I'll happily leave it up to someone else to go to the trouble of doing that.

Are there relations between your works?

Yes, there are many connections between my pieces. I just don't want to make them readily apparent. There is a common poeticism and mentality in what I do, that gets portrayed differently in each of the pieces. I'm always working towards a single idea, no matter what the final portrayal is like.

Can you talk about what that idea is?

Do I have to? Would it help? As I said, I'd rather leave it up to someone else to find that. I need to maintain a mystery to my work, lest it evaporate. If what I'm doing is obvious, maybe that meant that my references weren't deep enough, or there weren't enough of them. If I ever reach the point where I'm straightforward and penetrating about the synthesis of my work, maybe that will make it altogether unnecessary.

Do you take a prospective viewer into account as you make the work?

Maybe. I make sure the work is available on multiple levels. On one level to the laziest of viewers, and on another to the more sophisticated. As the work is fabricated as a network of references, I don't demand that the viewer needs to know them in order to enjoy the work. However the references are there if the viewer has the knowledge, or if they want to find out.

Is there a role that memory plays?

A lot of work comes from memory, in the sense that it is the corrupted memory of the original artwork that I am presenting. It gets back to the concept of fault, or fissure and how it is an inherent part of memory, or in a greater sense, of history. I don't think there is any difference between history and fiction. It's just a matter of how close you're looking at it. At some point all histories have to become fictions, because there is only so much you can explain, or remember. At some point you have to make that leap and summate or distill by editing and artificially connecting things. If anything, my work just does that on a slightly more macroscopic level, makes it easier to see with the naked eye.

Since your work references art in its creation, how do your finished pieces factor into the your new ones?

I think that dual role is never far from my mind. I constantly have to force myself to see my work as both a finished piece and one that hasn't been made yet. Whatever I make is always on the verge of collapsing back in upon itself. I like it that way. I don't really believe that there is a defined beginning or ending for what I am doing. I prefer to see it as a cancerous growth on the side of art, a sustained echo that slowly degrades.

You have spoken of the role chess plays in your art.

Yes, chess is important. There is something about the idea of the game, a microcosm of rules which govern your choice, it's a wonderful metaphor for my larger explorations of interactions and systems. Also, there is the parallel with language. In both chess and language, you have a finite set of actions but a infinite set of variations. The duality of the finite and infinite echoes the same interplay I use with appropriation and innovation.

And you spoke about endgames…

Yes, endgames in chess fascinate me. It's fascinating when roles shift. Kings and pawns become key players. Pawns, they're always sacrificed, and kings are sacrificed for, but in the endgame, they're all that's left. The pieces are seen in a new light. They are played differently. Kings are safe to make captures, pawns become fierce opponents. There is a certain mysticism when objects take on new roles. The same happens to art. It means something very different if it is in an artist's studio as opposed to a museum.

Can you elaborate?

Of course. In a studio it's an unknown quantity. It could be valuable, it could be important, but at that moment it is pure potential. As it progresses through galleries and collectors' homes, it gains a sort of cultural equity. It now

means something that it has been here, bought by that person there. When it reaches the museum, it has changed to something new. The value is now known. Part of it is purely that fact that it is there. You trust the value of something in a museum in the same way you trust a doctor in a lab coat. You may not know their history, but you believe that someone informed must have made the decision to put them there. But it's wonderful that in all that movement the work itself hasn't changed. It is still the same piece that was in the artist's studio. All the value that it has, all the importance, is this invisible cloud that surrounds it. It's all a put-on. It could have just as easily been discarded, and forgotten.

Do you believe your work will ever be discarded or forgotten?

I don't think the statistics are particularly good for any art in the long run, really. What I'm doing here, in all honestly, is just what I want for myself. I couldn't see anyone else ever really caring about it. When someone does care about it, it's lucky. But I don't expect it.

Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

It was my pleasure, though I'm sorry I couldn't have been here.

The Tyranny of the Mirror

Geoffrey Sonnabend

In order to begin to come to a sense of the art of Josh Morden, it is necessary to see where it ends. For this we turn to the close of Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), a book which looms over any discussion of his work. At its conclusion, it proclaims "copier comme autrefois," or, in other words, end by beginning to copy once again.[1] This conceptual roundabout, starting from where it itself already ends, is a conceit in play throughout Morden's art.

It is easy to understand Flaubert's importance to Morden's work. In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, two copy clerks vacate their mundane jobs to pursue the philosophical imperatives of the Enlightenment, to comprehend and catalogue all knowledge. Unfortunately, with each investigation into the sciences and the arts they are stymied by contradictions, quelling each avenue of study soon after it is begun. In the end, they realize the ultimate folly of their quest. After their extensive investigations, they are left no wiser and are disaffected in the belief that knowledge can be gained, or that there is meaning to such a gain. They are left as dilettantes rather than scholars, an affliction common among the progeny of the Enlightenment. Finally, with their quest behind them, they are delighted to return to copying once more.

Morden maintains the argument that their return to copying did not mean their quest was over. Their resort to the copy could merely be an acceptance that the distillation of knowledge can only be realized in its recitation, due to its resistance to successful compression by human agency. This concept is mirrored in Jorge Luis Borges's *On Exactitude in Science* (1946), which through a parable of cartography tells the tale of mapmakers of a kingdom who finally achieve maps so detailed and so perfect that they fit upon the land in one-to-one scale. Unfortunately, the seeds of such a map's failure are in its own success, as its meticulous parallelism makes its use ultimately unnecessary, with the land itself providing all the information exactly as the map presents it.[2]

This mirroring of knowledge as the method of its distillation, however defectively it is rendered in the pursuit of its own success, is echoed throughout Morden's work. His intention is to problematize the original and the copy, to confuse the demarcation of beginnings and endings in order to obscure the differences between the two. Thus all of his work in one way or another is obsessed with mirroring, the logic of the mirror and the inherent peculiarities the mirror internalizes. This methodology frames his approach to his medium: the art world at large. Transcending postmodern boundaries of art and image, he hybridizes and cannibalizes the delineations between source and product.

As Morden claims authorship in his creation of amalgamative artworks pieced from the history of art, a critical connection is made to the work of Marcel Duchamp. In 1964, Duchamp scratched his signature into the back of a mirror,[3] thereby appropriating everything it reflected as his creation, progressing beyond the concepts already employed in his earlier readymades. These earlier concepts ascribed the value of art objects to a curated collection of appropriated mass-produced objects and in doing so set the definition of a work of art to be any object which would be claimed as such.[4] By appropriating a mirror as his artwork, he claimed not only an single object, but a conceptual container in which any subject would fall under his attribution if so reflected in it. In other words, he defined art as an almost purely philosophical position rather than any material product. The philosophical argument brought up by this was later mirrored in the discourse surrounding validity of the authorial claim, dissected by French poststructuralists in the 1950s and 60s.

The writings of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes[5] contend that the singularity of the author/creator placed an undue restriction upon the interpretation of the work of art, and that art should be altered to perceive it as "a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture."[6] The move towards seeing the work as autonomous and divorced from its authorship can also be found, once again, in a story by Borges, namely *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (1939), which is a meditation on how interpretation shifts depending on what author is supposed as the authority of the piece.[7]

A philosophical problem arises, however, when the thesis of the poststructuralists is weighed against Duchamp's appropriations. If an authorial claim, denounced by the postructuralists, must be made in order for an appropriation to gain value, as evinced in Duchamp's work, whose argument is valid? Perhaps a resolution for this opposition can come through Duchamp himself, in his 1957 talk entitled *The Creative Act*. In it, he posited the role of the viewer as at least equal to that of the artist, because it is the viewer who interprets and bestows posterity upon the artwork.[8] Therefore Duchamp suggests that the author is a creation of the spectator, not the artist, as it is the spectator who must "see" the artist (as such). The argument, when applied to Duchamp's mirror, implies that while he could claim all that was reflected in it as his art, it would require the viewer to look at Duchamp's mirror and what was reflected in it to establish the validity of his declaration. Applying these foundations to Morden's work dualizes his role, giving him the mantle of creator and observer in the ever-replicated logic of the mirror. As an observer of the culture of art, Morden reifies his personal viewership in his appropriations, reinserting himself back into the audience to comment on others who have reified culture according to their own observations. Morden takes the copy, essentially, and copies it again.

As well, Morden poses the work as synonymous with the Lacanian mirror stage, although applied to art. The mirror stage, defined by Jacques Lacan as the psychological birth of subjectivity in mind of the subject, is encountered when, as an

infant, the subject first see themselves in a mirror. The mirror stage both unites the subject's body as "whole" and defines outside forces as separate from the corporeal self. When applied to art, the mirror stage recognizes the mechanisms of influence which shape and affect the art world, isolating them in order to critically appraise their often unacknowledged control.

To define Morden's work as playing this role is to place his art in league with those collectively addressed under the title of Institutional Critique. A group usually described as comprising Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Louise Lawler and, later, Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson and Mark Dion, Institutional Critique is unique among movements as none of the artists involved ever titled themselves as such, or invited the collective title to be applied to them.[9] This denial of a collective definition plays into the love-hate relationship that Institutional Critique has with the institution itself, at once attempting to stand outside of it and simultaneously being inextricably linked to its existence. First coined in 1985,[10] the title was applied to artists who took the institution and the artworld as fodder for critical appraisal, whether for political or preservationist goals, to produce art utilizing its mechanisms.[11] When considered as part of the movement, Morden's work can be construed as a salient critique of the mechanisms of influence that guide the creation of the mythos of the artist, working to illuminate the superficiality with which judgements and merit are usually applied.

However, Morden's work provides something more than that. Beyond the critical function, the work moves past the defined boundaries of a critique of the institution to an extented study of art's interplay in culture. Oddly, in appraising his work through this expanded lens, a parallel can be found between his interests and those of conceptual art. While the conceptualists concerned themselves with a study of the ethereal manifestations of thought, time and space,[12] Morden focuses on the intangible manifestations of value. Always existing outside of the art object but inextricably linked to its physical existence, the psychological worth of the art object, and by expansion, of the artist, is in constant play. This aeriform property, variously labelled aura or parergon in cultural discourse, finds itself delineated as a subject which Morden scrutinizes, confusing the conceptual edict of the artist-as-mystic by collapsing it back upon itself.[13] Thus while simultaneously scrutinizing the outcomes of this concept, Morden engages in it himself. A mirroring of the mirror once more.

This concept constantly re-emerges in Morden's work: the mirroring of the mirror, or for that matter, the copying of the copy, and can be traced back to Borges. As Borges likens the paired mirrors to the labyrinth, both offering an endless maze from which there is no escape.[14] Morden attempts to have the same occur. Ascribing an ultimate outcome to the dissection of culture by performing a perverse recitation of it, the success of the work lies in its unwillingness to assume any particular philosophy, instead simultaneously functioning on multiple levels.

Mirroring the acts of Bouvard and Pécuchet, Morden's recitation finds meaning in the copy, not its distillation. By using appropriation to set up an investigation of the progress of postmodern appropriation from conceptualism to today in parallel with the maturation of the mythologization of the artist and art-work, the interrogative mirror, held up to the mirror that grounded postmodernism, re-creates the infinite labyrinth of Borges.

Within the wider scope of contemporary art, Morden's self-reflexive exploration is indicative of a wider examination of what the ultimate meaning of art could be when any singular discourse has the potential of being positioned against its reflective opposite, negating any distinct advancement of a wholly exclusive singular thesis. The investigations undertaken by Morden therefore represent a nascent foray into the discourse on concepts surrounding exit scenarios from the art world, where not even the inclusivity and plurality originally prescribed to postmodernism can any longer apply.

Notes

1. Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard And Pécuchet*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 281.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 325.

3. Peter Eleey, *The Quick and the Dead* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2009), 212. As well, this concept was later echoed in the Michael Baldwin's 1965 artwork *Untitled Painting*, a series of four mirrors mounted to canvas. See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 20.

4. This definition was first used by Roberta Smith in 1976. Lawrence Weschler and Robert Irwin, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 189.

5. In particular their respective essays "The Death of The Author," *Aspen* 1, no. 5+6 (1967) and "What is an Author?" in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. Barthes, "The Death of The Author." Within the writings of Foucault and Barthes, the definition of a work of art fluidly shifts between the various possible literary, visual or auditory definitions.

7. Pierre Menard is discussed at length in the essay *Retrospectation: The Art of Looking Back in the Work of Josh Morden*, which also appears in this publication.

8. Marcel Duchamp, *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 138.

9. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to a Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 410.

10. The term "institutional critique" was first used by Andrea Fraser within her essay "In and Out of Place" (1985) reprinted in in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 18.

11. There is an onging argument between artists insinuated within Institutional Critique as to the goal of the movement. Two of the competing definitions of the ultimate result can be found in Hans Haacke's 1984 essay "Museums, Managers of Consciousness," in *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. Brian Wallis, 60-72 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), and Andrea Fraser's 2005 essay "From a Critique of Insitutions to an Institution of Critique."

12. Eleey, *The Quick and the Dead*, 34.

13. The term "aura" was first used by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 7, while "parergon" was coined by Jacques Derrida [Robin Marriner, "Derrida and the Parergon," in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 351]. The definition of "artist-as-mystic" comes from Sol Lewitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 75.

14. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 263.

Selected Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of The Author." *Aspen* 1, no. 5+6 (1967).

Beckett, Samuel. "The End." In *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, edited by S.E. Gontarski, 78-99. New York: Grove Press, 1995.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction*. Translated by J.A. Underwood. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Garden of Forking Paths." In *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 119-128. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Borges, Jorge Luis. "On Exactitude in Science." In *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 325. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Borges, Jorge Luis. “Pierre Menard, Author of The Quixote.” In *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 88-95. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

Borges, Jorge Luis. “The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths.” In *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 263-264. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

DeLillo, Don. *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Edited by Thomas DePietro. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

Dowling, Susan and Susan Sollins. *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Seasons 3-4. Arlington: PBS Home Video, 2005-7. DVD.

Duchamp, Marcel. *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. Edited by Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Ebert, Roger. “Chris Burden: ‘My God, are they going to leave me here to die?’.” *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 25, 1975.

Eleey, Peter. *The Quick and the Dead*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2009.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Bouvard And Pécuchet*. Translated by Mark Polizzotti. Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.

Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Donald Preziosi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Fraser, Andrea. "In and Out of Place." In *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, edited by Alexander Alberro, 17-27. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005.

Fraser, Andrea. "From the Critique of Institutions to a Institution of Critique." In *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 408-417. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009.

Fraser, Andrea. "Official Welcome." In *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, edited by Alexander Alberro, 212-228. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005.

Gambrell, Dorothy. "Commentary." *Cat and Girl*, November 19, 2010. http://catandgirl.com/?p=2716.

Gambrell, Dorothy. "Museum Piece." *Cat and Girl*, December 3, 2010. http://catandgirl.com/?p=2722.

Gambrell, Dorothy. "Appetite for Deconstruction." *Cat and Girl*, June 26, 2007. http://catandgirl.com/?p=513.

Graham, Dan. "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art.'" In *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 408-417. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999.

Haacke, Hans. "Museums, Managers of Consciousness." In *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, edited by Brian Wallis, 60-72. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987.

Haidu, Rachel. *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010.

Harrison, Charles. *Essays on Art & Language.* Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003.

Holzer, Jenny, David Joselit, Joan Simon, and Renata Saleci. *Jenny Holzer*. London: Phaidon Press, 1998.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994.

Klemm, Elizabeth. "Mr. Squishy." *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* 5 (2000): 199-248.

Kosuth, Joseph. "Four Interviews with Arthur Rose." In *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, edited by Lucy Lippard, 71-74. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Lethem, Jonathan. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." *Harper's Magazine*, February, 2007.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Work of Art*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1934.

Lewitt, Sol. "Sentences on Conceptual Art." In *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, edited by Lucy Lippard, 75-76. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Marriner, Robin. "Derrida and the Parergon." In *A Companion to Art Theory*, edited by Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

Moltke-Beadsman, Brint and Lenore Beadsman-Moltke. <+>. Chicago: Frequent and Vigorous Publishing, 2007.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Crying Of Lot 49*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1965.

Reza, Yasmina. *'Art'*. Translated by Chistopher Hampton. New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 1996.

Siskind, Jay Murray. "An Undeniably Controversial and Perhaps Even Repulsive Talent." *Modernism/Modernity* 11-4 (2004): 819-21.

Shier, Reid, ed. *Remakes, Variations (1741-2092): Tim Lee: Works (2001-08)*. Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery / Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2008.

Sokal, Alan D. "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." *Social Text* 46/47 (1996): 217-252.

Sonnabend, Geoffrey. *Obsolescence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1946.

Weschler, Lawrence. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet Of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*. New York: Vintage, 1996.

Weschler, Lawrence, and Robert Irwin. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Wharfinger, Richard. "The Courier's Tragedy." In P*lays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur and Warfinger*. Berkeley: The Lectern Press, 1957.

List of Works

1. *À tous les étages*, 2011
artist book
11.5 x 9 inches
edition of 12
(p. 25)

2. *CHEERFUL CONTROLLERS MAIL DEATH*
from *Platitudes*, 2009
pencils, envelopes, paper tags
various dimensions
open edition
(p. 21)

3. *Colloquialism*, 2010
artist book
11 x 8.5 inches
edition of 7
(p. 27)

4. *Constant Agitation (after Mel Ramsden)*, 2011
oil on canvas
30 x 24 inches
(p. 23)

5. *Erwin O. Christensen,* The History of Western Art *(New York: The New American Library, 1959), 34-35*
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches
edition of 7
(p. 30)

6. *FINE LIES HARM SYMPATHETICALLY*
from *Platitudes*, 2009
screenprint
20 x 16 inches
open edition
(p. 19)

7. *Frederick Hartt,* Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Volume I *(New York: Harry N. Abrams, inc., 1976), 136-137*
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches
edition of 7
(p. 31)

8. *Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey,* Gardner's Art Through the Ages, Sixth Edition *(New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), 184-185*
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches
edition of 7
(p. 33)

9. *Jean Anne Vincent,* History of Art: With Examination Questions and Answers, Second Edition *(New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1970), cover*
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches
edition of 7
(p. 32)

10. *John Kissick,* Art: Context and Criticism, Second Edition *(New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 60-61*
from *No Title (Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1365 BC)*, 2011
c-print
24 x 24 inches
edition of 7
(p.29)

11. *LIABLE NAÏVE ENTITIES*
from *Platitudes*, 2009
mouse trap
1.75 x 3.75 x .75 inches
open edition
(p. 22)

12. *NICELY GRACED THE VANITIES*
from *Platitudes*, 2009
screenprint
20 x 16 inches
open edition
(p. 20)

13. *Quixote*, 2010
modified bookwork
7.75 x 5.25 inches
edition of 8
(p. 15)

14. *Robert Motherwell, Elegy to the Spanish Republic, 70, 1961; Audio Tour (Metropolitan Museum of, New York City)*, 2010
audio recording
2:37 min
edition of 5
(p. 26)

15. *Silence, Exile and Cunning*, 2010
printed card / performance
2 x 3.5 inches
edition of 500
(p. 24)

16. *SUFFER SOMETHING IMAGINATION SEEKS*
from *Platitudes*, 2009
screenprint
20 x 16 inches
open edition
(p. 20)

17. *TO A SUBLIME HOMINESS*
from *Platitudes*, 2009
screenprint
20 x 16 inches
open edition
(p. 20)

18. *untitled*, 2010
perfume impregnated cardstock
4.75 x 4.25 inches
(p. 18)

19. *Without the Courage to End or the Strength to Go On*, 2010
installation
dimensions variable
(pp. 16-17)

Index

Josh Morden: À tous les étages

Published by
The Lectern Press, Toronto

On the occasion of the exhibition
Josh Morden: À tous les étages
(Works 2009-11)

Editor: Emory Bortz
Design: Chuck Higby

Typeset in Palatino on Canford paper

Printed in Canada by The Lectern Press

The publishers gratefully acknowledge the support of Jim Drobnick, Ian Carr-Harris, Roderick Grant, Marcus Boon, Martha Ladly, Rosemary Donegan, Alice Brummell, Don Taylor, Lauren Wetmore, David Hildebrand Wilson, Barbara Bloom and Imp Kerr & Associates, NYC.

copier comme autrefois