

All We Can Do
Is What We
Are Actually
Doing Already

Scott Joseph
Under The Sign
13.9–12.10.2014



I. Under the Rug, Under the Sign

I recently told an artist I know that the language of her performance was incomplete. She handled this admittedly vague criticism gracefully, and furthermore agreed with me that she still feels she needs, “to define more precisely the language [she] wants to use.” In the first performance I’d seen by Brussels-based artist Marie-Andrée Pellerin at the Dutch Art Institute, she demonstrated the transformation of materials through a pseudo-alchemical process. Borrowing the gestures and language of a chemistry class demonstration, she displayed and spoke about all of materials she was using, and within a time-span of 20 minutes, cast a plaster pyramid on the tabletop. While she (unfortunately) doesn’t change plaster into gold, she complicates the value of the objects she makes by dropping foreign currency, texts, or even spoken intentions into hand-sized, geometrical plaster-molded forms. These small



Marie-Andrée Pellerin, *Tutorial #1 — How to make a closed structure*, 2014, photo by Maria Barlasov.

bodies in a palette of greys enclose the materials within, and keep them hidden, that is, unless one has the opportunity to watch Pellerin making the sculptures.

In a recent performance titled “Housekeeper” at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, she generated a prolonged moment of tension among a large gathering of people by placing these objects, which were not identified as artworks, or even as objects she had made, on the floor and sweeping them into a pile, then dragging out a large industrially produced Persian rug belonging to the museum, and covering the objects. She calmly and efficiently dragged this lumpy rug, an indicator of poorly-hidden and awkward presences, throughout the galleries, as if she were doing a job. At times she let the objects fall behind and be exposed, and then swiftly swept them back under the rug. The performance ended when Pellerin pushed all of the objects neatly into the center of the upturned rug and folded them up into a kind of “hot pocket” bun. One is given no indication that anything could have been mixed into the plaster objects; perhaps nothing has been added to the basic materials. Their smooth, flat, grey surfaces effectively conceal all, while the lumpy rug shouts the obvious, “there’s something underneath.”

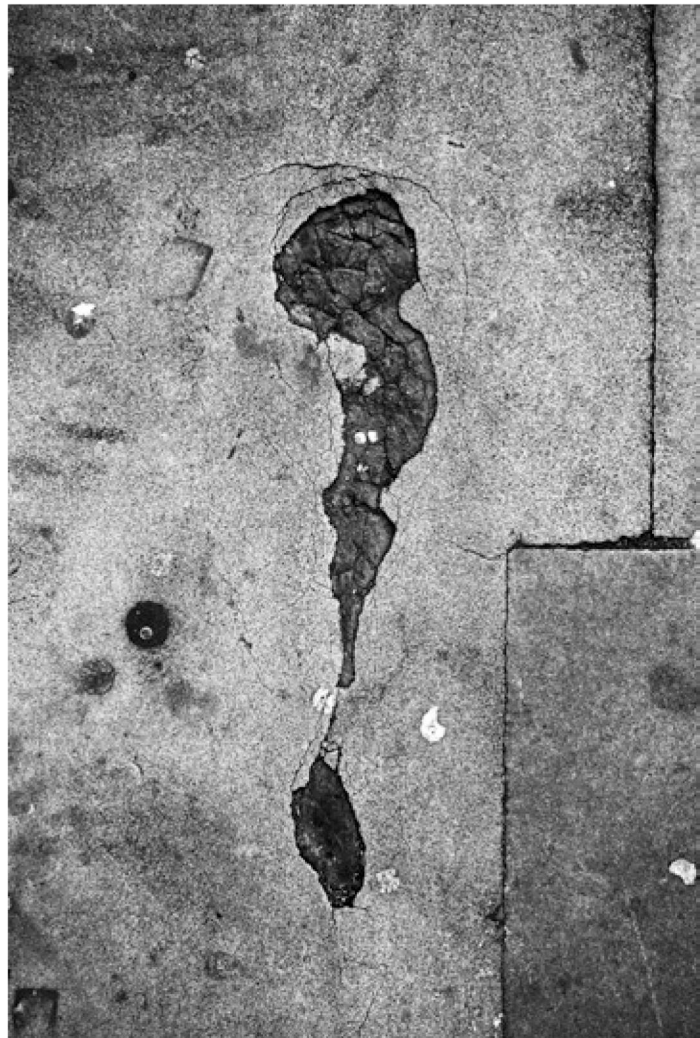
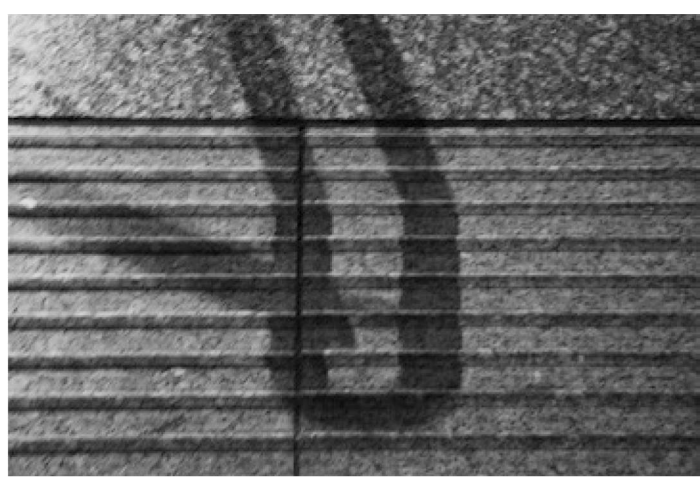
I ask myself now if language has a place at all in Pellerin’s performance, and if so, in which ways could the language be considered incomplete? My comment to Pellerin was a way of saying I was unsatisfied with the way she performed the idiomatic expression “to sweep something under the rug” because I could not place the performance as belonging to the space of the museum, or to the space of domesticity which was implied by the title. I also could have said that if there were a metaphor within the gesture, I couldn’t find it, but instead I criticized her performance on the basis of having “incomplete language.” Upon further reflection, it is clear that she hadn’t been seeking completion, which is anyway a misnomer in this context, but instead concealment, and how that manifested is yet another topic for discussion. Completion could be a criterion on which to assess a performance or work of art, but it would be better applied to reading comprehension of



Marie-Andrée Pellerin, *Housekeeper*,
photo by Dai Xiyun.

a textual work. That is to say, how well can work that is purportedly “dealing with semiotics”, the theory of signs and symbols, allow for comprehension? Completion, rather than language, must have a part in it.

This brings me to Scott Joseph, and the first of a series of three exhibitions titled “All We Can Do Is What We Are Actually Doing Already” at P/////AKT. The body of work he presented included high-contrast black and white silkscreen prints, a collection of 18 assemblages made from found materials, four photos of his assemblages, an HD “film” called “Sodium/Xenon,” and a short printed text garnered from various sources including the US Declaration of Independence and a coded message sent by Jan Morris on an Everest expedition. Scott Joseph, who lectures on graphic design at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham (UK), asserted from our first meeting that he works with language and I made a silent note to myself how frequently this convolution has begun to appear in art and among other artists I work with. I recently had the pleasure of being introduced to the composer and musician Yannis Kyriakides, and my companion told him, “This is Marianna. She works with language.” Because Kyriakides is a composer and makes pointed use of texts in his compositions, videos and performances, he could claim this without pretension. He generously asked me in which way I was “working with language,” and without thinking I said, “I write,” which is insufficiently descriptive, but honest. Anyway, having ruled out “incomplete language” as a valid criticism for Pellerin’s sweep at the Van Abbemuseum, can Joseph’s work be dealt with in terms of language? Passing over the obvious similarities in titles



Scott Joseph, *U & I (If I lose you in the street will you come with me if I follow you)*, *Alphabetical Pareidolia*, 2013–ongoing.

and themes (Joseph's "Under the Sign" and Pellerin's attention to things "under the rug,") where else do they intersect?

Let's return to what the artists said. Pellerin told me that she wanted to define her language, while Joseph, was searching for language, scanning the ground on his long walks around deserted areas on the outskirts of London, collecting small objects that would somehow articulate that language. His carefully arranged assemblages show a sophisticated level of sensitivity to visual elements: balance, texture and color. He seemed to want to stimulate visual curiosity and imagination among viewers who, after seeing his work, might also be tempted to read letters and words in the sidewalk cracks, and make a meaningful system out of the curious shapes of everyday parts and pieces. Joseph, like Pellerin, is interested in demonstrating how the work comes into being, but the findings still sit on the surface. The meaning is still underneath a layer of arbitrariness (irrelevant references, over-explanation, dangling concepts, so-called "incomplete language") if it is there at all. Joseph sets out all of the individual parts he found while drifting around the city and arranges them in clear view on white sheets of paper on the floor, like mechanics do with auto parts in a garage. The result is that while looking at his work, viewers take the same posture he did while collecting and arranging; this connects the viewer with the artist and takes into consideration the viewer's body. But this also means we cannot go deeply into the work without hitting the unyielding surface of the floor — and we are not inspired to dig.

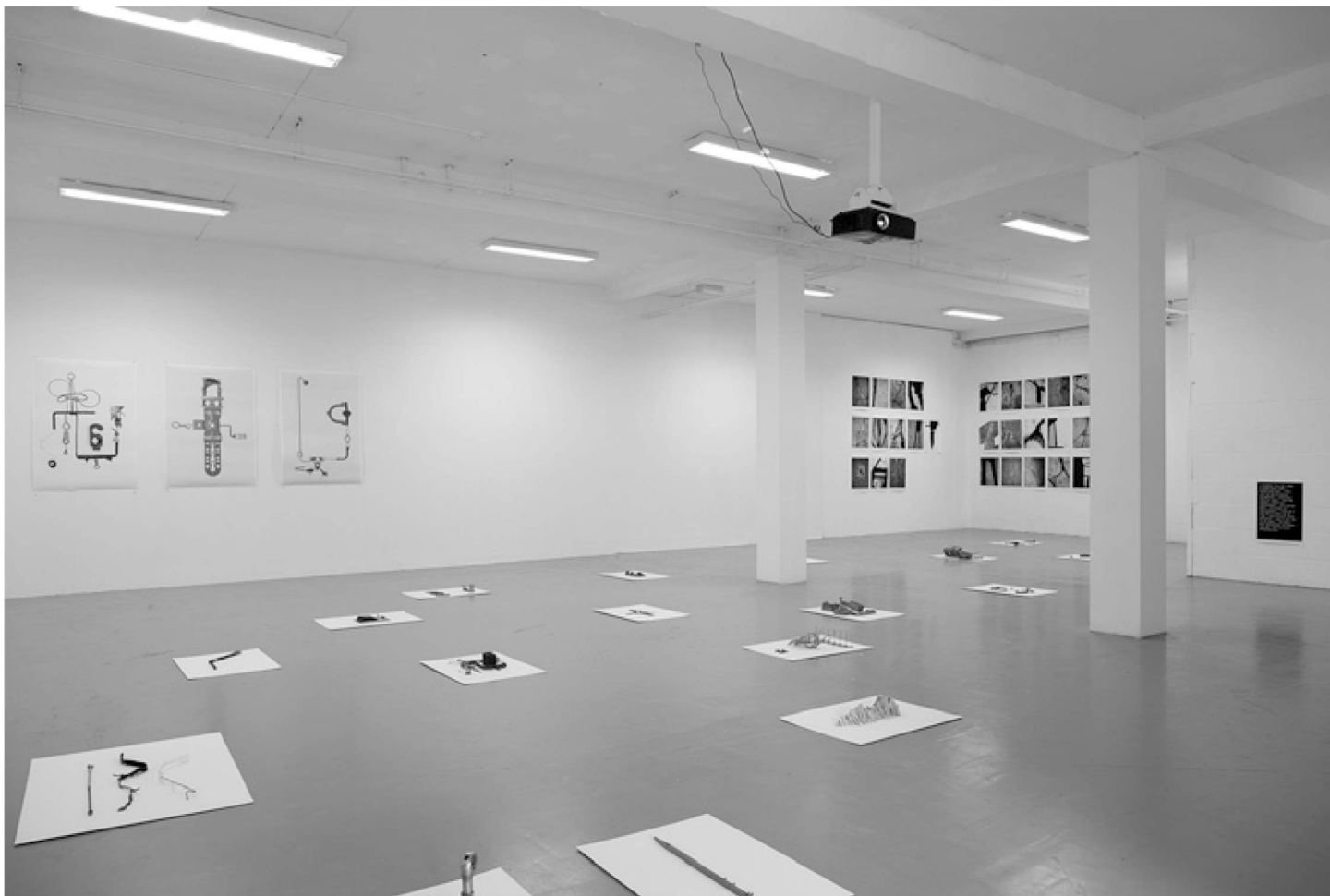
Of course, both artists look to the floor for inspiration, as is apparent in the works themselves and the words they choose to talk about their work. Perhaps the most striking point of intersection for these two is not how they make work but how they make claims about language. Pellerin's use of idiomatic language didn't satisfy my formulation of how phrases and the concepts they imply become meaningful, thus the sense of incompleteness. And for Joseph, while each piece was sensitively manifested, the exhibition as a whole also seemed to be missing content, meaning, or dare I say, *message*? Whether an artist declares outright that he or she works with language, or on the other hand, later claims that he or she is finding it or defining it, the returning question of *message* remains suspended.

To support this notion, which is now just beginning to emerge, and quietly threatens to bring the word "message" back into contemporary art discourse, consider this excerpt from a discussion between Georges Charbonnier and Claude Lévi-Strauss, published in "Art as a System of Signs" and "The Demands of the Code" (1961):

G.C. “It is noticeable that art-critics, in writing their articles, constantly use the word ‘language.’ Not exactly in the sense you give it, and this is only to be expected, since art critics are not anthropologists. But one gets the impression that the world ‘language’ has become meaningless.”

C.L.-S. Yes, the term ‘language,’ or linguistic terms in general, are often misused. I think that what the art critic or artist really means by ‘language’ is probably something like ‘message,’ with the implication that the artist is addressing himself to a spectator or a listener. This relationship...

G.C. Yes, indeed it is to avoid the word ‘message’ that they use ‘language.’



Scott Joseph, *Under the Sign*, Installation View, 2014.