

# Maxine Kopsa AUTHENTICITY

## AUTHENTICITY

OK. Wait. Slow down.

I just bought new sneakers in order to feel safer in the desert. We are on the road, on our way to meet V. in Joshua Tree and be toured round the test sites and I need to pee before we get there.

We stop at a gas station, fill up, may as well, and they say their toilet is out of order. I run to the deli next door (in the desert that takes 3 running minutes), and ask the lady with the hair pulled back and an apron on, lips turned down, if I may possibly use their washroom (feeling too aware of my too new too bright blue orange and yellow new balances), She looks at me, doesn't move a hair on her face, doesn't

even seem to move her lips when she says I can get you a wet cloth. And I stare back my mind rolling around the different possibilities I can quickly imagine dealing with the cloth, its wetness, me having to pee on it, and wondering where? And instead of asking what she thinks I could do with the wet cloth, I say, I simply repeat, but can I use your washroom. And she looks back at me – as still as an owl – and says again, I can get you a wet cloth. I run back, jump in the car cross my legs, take a deep breath and hold it longer than necessary. We drive to the next possible place that looks like it could have a washroom. A ¼ mile down the only road, this time manned by two, and bright and big. I ask them the same question.

One smile says sure and points to the back. My friend comes in after me.

Minutes later, I'm done, relieved and in the station store and my friend is laughing with the attendant and she asks him so how did you know she was from Canada? They both look at me. Here we don't say washroom he tells her. Suddenly I see myself through the owl's eyes, bright shoe-ed and urban, asking for a place to have a shower, in the middle of not much, on the side of a highway, and her, now less an owl and more polite, doing her damndest to understand why.

Apparently Canadians find the term toilet indelicate. (I have to admit, I would indeed never ask anyone if I could use their toilet, even writing it makes me uncomfortable. And there, at the first stop, in the deli, I certainly didn't want to insult anyone.) Oddly, in an instant, in a word, I was exposed, my history, my heritage – one I was not even aware of myself.

#### TRANSITION

I had to think of Ben Kinmont when reading again about Marcel Broodthaers' *Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie...* About their possible connections, their shared dismantling of limitations, of words and material as interchangeable, but not meaningless, about alternative economies and reflections on labor.

In 1998 Ben Kinmont began his project *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family*. Which, as the title suggests is a project that is meant to question and ultimately lessen the divide between an artwork and the regular world. It is still ongoing. He qualified the project in the following manner:

*I have started an antiquarian bookselling business to help support my family. The artwork is not the business itself, but the contribution to our cost of living. Because the business specializes in books about food and wine before 1840, it also provides a broader context in which to see domestic activity as meaningful. So far it has been successful.*

Kinmont's practice is a series of active occurrences, meetings, events, publi-

cations, and curated exhibitions. The created situations, that are all eventually carefully and consistently archived, engage himself and a willing participant in a relationship. By way of what Kinmont terms "catalytic texts", the setting, or parameters for situations are determined. This could range from Kinmont making a waffle breakfast for people, to washing dishes in a museum, to him engaging in a dialogue on the street, offering to help out his listener, interlocutor, anyone, in domestic chores. The catalytic texts would, for example, be made available to the public as flyers. Here's an edited example:

*Perhaps. Slow down. [...] We have come to something else, on our way to buy groceries, to see more art, or to visit a friend for a cup of coffee. These pathways sometimes cross, as ours have today [...]. I am asking you to help me bridge the gap which separates the art world from the non-art world. [...] – "Forse. Rallenta." "Perhaps. Slow down."*

The catalytic text would appear to be a realistic call. But the questions remains: in this ostensibly generous invitation to begin a discussion, is Kinmont genuinely interested in an outcome he did not orchestrate, does he truly stand open for the authentic engagement of an outsider? Or would Kinmont only *seemingly* be effacing his authorship? And finally, is it actually only possibly to *seemingly* efface one's own authorship? To author a thing and not author it at the same time?

#### ACTION

Through Kinmont, I was introduced to others, others who also tread the water between a work and a non-work, namely, the artists Christopher D'Arcangelo and Peter Nadin. Both explored issues of value and absence; in fact, one could say, they attempted to be present and not present at the same time. In relation to human authorship as well as to the status of the object, they questioned whether it was possible to be in two states at once or two things at once? Actions in a sense become words, words, actions. Chris D'arcangelo once wrote:

When I state that I am an Anarchist,  
I must also state that I am not an  
anarchist, to be in keeping with  
the (----) idea of Anarchism.  
(With Anarchism written upside down).

In a conversation on 22 October 1997  
published in Kinmont's *Antinomian  
Press project, Project Series: Chris*  
① *D'Arcangelo*, Ben asks Peter what he  
and Chris were doing in people's homes  
and how they thought about the idea of  
value and function and the art installation.  
And Peter says that probably outside of  
the two of them, no one else cared about  
whether the ceilings and walls they were  
making were sculptures or not, just that  
they worked and were done on time. But  
there were invitations, Ben points out:

Nine days of work:  
912 sq. ft. 38' x 24'

Function by Louise Lawler

Design by function

Execution by Peter Nadin  
and Christopher D'Arcangelo\*

Materials:  
Celatex, Drywall,  
Lath, and Nails

Purchased by Louise Lawler

The product of nine days work  
may be seen on January 23rd  
and 30th, 1978, between 3:00  
and 6:00 at 407 Greenwich St.  
N.Y.C., 3rd floor, front.

Peter says: well, yes and that he thinks  
it was a kind of inquiry about what the  
difference was between *sheetrock* and a  
*piece of sheetrock as sculpture* – was it a  
matter of proximity to a gallery or museum  
or was it really something fundamentally  
different? This, in a time, he tells Ben,  
when Flavin was going to the hardware  
store to get his fluorescent tubes, Daniel  
Buren was doing his stripes thing and  
Ryman's paintings were all white.

Five and a half days work:  
2,548 sq ft., 22' 11' x 10',  
12 ½' x 6 1/2' x 10',

12 ½' x 6 ½' x 10'

Function by Jeane, Philip,  
Nia and Ann Harper

Design by function

Execution by Robert Jeniger  
and Christopher D'Arcangelo\*  
Materials: Plaster  
and Latex paint

Purchased by Jeane  
and Philip Harper

The product of five and a half  
days work may be seen on  
January 17th, 1978, between  
10:00 am. and 5 pm. at 166  
½ East 81st St. N.Y.C.

\*We have joined together  
to execute functional  
construction and to alter or  
refurbish existing structures  
as a means of surviving in  
a capitalist economy.

Peter Nadin and Christopher  
D'Arcangelo can be Contacted  
to execute future works at:  
84 West Broadway N.Y.C.,  
N.Y. 10012. Tel. 966-6139

Peter says he and Chris would paint walls,  
think about it, and then discuss these  
issues. And they would consider: where  
does the difference lie if you're painting  
white on white on a wall or on a canvas, if  
there's no transcendence of the object?

After a few years of doing the con-  
struction pieces, Peter and Chris opened  
this "thing" as Peter calls it, on West  
Broadway. The set-up, he tells Ben, was  
to extend the idea that you have the wall,  
but then, he explains, what do you do  
with it? So the gallery was started (also  
because Nadin needed a visa) and it held on  
to a cumulative principle, underlining the  
relationships that were already in place,  
the collaborations and cross-crossing  
already happening between a certain  
community. Anyone going to hang some-  
thing on the wall was responding to what  
the previous people hung on the wall. Or  
as the growing invitation card read: "The  
Work shown in this space is a response

to the existing conditions and/or work previously shown within the space.” With every show the announcement card would literally be extended to include the new chapter in the on-going gallery history.

The first step was a new construction piece, not unlike the previous domestic constructions. A wall needed to be built. Once it was completed, it too was announced similarly to the previous construction pieces and *opened* the on the West Broadway location on the 9th of November 1978 (this time “the function” was by Peter Nadin).

At the time Chris D’Arcangelo was doing installation work for Daniel Buren. And so ideas about labor, payment, value and art easily merged as potential issues addressed in and through the gallery and in the other construction pieces. It was therefore not inappropriate that on December 12th, Buren opened as the second exhibition at the gallery with a piece called *FOLLOWING AND TO BE FOLLOWED*.

Ultimately, the gallery closed sometime after May 1979, following shows by Sean Scully, Jane Reynolds, Peter Fend and Rhys Chatham. It had lasted eight months to a year – until Chris killed himself – and that was it, Peter says.

Presence and absence remained crucial to D’Arcangelo, this attempt at being present *and* not present, complicit with a system in place and subversive. For instance, he was invited to exhibitions but not mentioned (as a blank on the invitation card); Or he invited others in his stead. He had convinced Rudy Fuchs, then the director of the Van Abbemuseum, to remove everything from the museum’s spaces, all that was in the exhibitions at the time, and replace it all with anything and everything the people of Eindhoven wanted to see and have in their museum. Because, in the end, it was their museum. The project was never completed, though apparently it was underway at the time of D’Arcangelo’s death.

#### AUTHENTICITY

We have a vegan lunch in the Natural Sister’s Café in Joshua Tree waiting for Neil Doshi and Vanesa Zendejas to meet us. My shiny shoes are once again at home amidst this sophisticated metropolitan setting.

Neil had just finished working on

the first publication for the High Desert Test Sites – we saw the book launch at the LA Art Book Fair two days earlier. And Vanesa is an artist and working at Andrea Zittel’s A–Z West enterprise, an ongoing project or, better, an ‘institute of investigative living,’ also part of the High Desert Test Sites. All in the name of fostering the production of work, thoughts, exchanges and experience in to order to “challenge all to expand their definition of art to take on new areas of relevancy.”

②

We tour Zittel’s estate with Neil and Vanesa, including the sleeping wagons for residents, the studios, the looms, the chickens, the vegetables, the buckets (public *washrooms*), the other outdoor facilities like the communal kitchen. It’s beautifully designed, spacious, inviting and we’re feeling inspired as we get back into our obscenely huge, white 7 person American SUV and follow Vanesa and Neil in their Honda. Back to the highway, left past the Sister’s Café and right at the Institute of Mentalphysics (or the Joshua Tree Retreat Center, designed by Frank & son Lloyd Wright). We travel deeper into the desert, away from the Joshua Tree gentrification, following a twisting dirt road for about an hour into the Yucca Valley, to a place, to a *land*, a 640 acre desert permaculture sanctuary, Neil tells us, that is owned by “Garth”.

We arrive at what could be an entrance. We climb and turn and turn again, passing a VW van, parked (for good) next to a structure with a sink in it. We stop close by, our massive whale of brand new a car now even more grossly contrasted with the hilly brown eco conscious rocky landscape dotted only very sporadically with sustainably minded camouflaged structures. Assumedly places where the rest of the community live and cook and work. We’re quite high and over the peak of the rock, we can see far into the flatter land, to the right there is the corner of a building visible, what looks like an open balustrade.

#### ACTION

Neil shuffles in front of us, along the path skirting the largest boulder. And we get to... we get to... well, we get to an entrance, a glass door, a poured concrete floor, wall to wall sliding doors, an upper unfinished level, tight corners, sharp angles, heavy

metal beams, a half open outer space, a set of concrete steps. Everything wedged between two massive rounded boulders. Well, here it is: Connections.

In 2012 Neil Doshi together with his partner Scott Barry – their design studio is called *Women* – spoke to Garth and convinced him that they should build a temporary construction on his land, one that could house their practice. So that they, for a period of about a year could live and work amongst the moveable, utopian community Garth somehow leads. The plan was to build for 6 months, complete the structure (studio space below, a residence above) and then to work for 6 months. The construction time thus a direct reflection of the work time as designers – the physical and mental effort split equally into two different types of labor. It's been 5 years now. And the slump of Neil's shoulders is telling. His words don't mask his disillusionment, either. We tried to do something here which was meant to be, at first, a temporary living and working model, a kind of idealist concept that reflected back onto our own practice, molded it, he tells us. It was to be an insertion into an existing utopia community, not necessarily in discord with the rest of the community, but following its own logic. He touches the upper left corner of the double glazed sliding door and says, see, Garth wanted round corners. He wanted all the corners to be round, he himself has been living in a Teepee for the past 30 years, only recently has it been remade in concrete. And he would have preferred a painting of camouflage on the window here. There's even a "Garth Green" that we're meant to use, a particular color of paint that everyone uses for any exposed construction. We look back blankly: so that the drones won't pick it up as permanent housing, Neil explains.

*thefirstyeariscalledconnectionsanddisconceived.as* is a recount written and recorded by Scott and Neil, of some of the group's meetings with what sounds like a still hopeful sketch of the surroundings, the people involved, with the young design team still fresh outsider meat. The open community rules and regulations are albeit immediately apparent, but somehow, the entry *Spring* is a snapshot of a moment when things could still become *done*:

## SPRING

Spring has arrived and Kilo an Emmanuel have a dinner at the dome site to welcome it. The smell of spinach and salmon crepes seems to travel through the entire valley and the elders show up just in time to eat.

Overflow seating at the meeting this Monday. Garth says it's the first time it's ever felt like a real community. Different groups report on their individual projects. Covering Nicodemouse's house, fixing the yurt, planting in the spring garden.

Welcoming two new members to the group, Pamela asks them for two weeks of silence, to listen and acclimate. Garth asks them to dress less militaristic and adorn themselves with color and sun necklaces. They own guns, which makes everyone a little uncomfortable and sparks a conversation about defense, revenge, us vs. them. No conclusion is met.

Probably sometime after the summer of 2013, after they had set up the kickstarter fundraiser for Garth, helped him think about the future, long-term sustainability, had built up Connections to such a degree that they realized it was going to be more permanent than temporary (becoming, they thought a residency and communal library), things started changing for *Women* in this desert sanctuary. Demands from Garth regarding structure and design, obligations towards him and the others, a feeling of not quite seen as belonging (as Neil and Scott came and went, and others lived there), but still trying to help the whole, created an unmaintainable situation. Scott left. And Neil continued on his own, still learning how to build as he went, securing professional help from craftsmen who dealt in permanency, trying to remain positive.

## WASHROOM TO RESTROOM

Connections is now an art gallery. What we see when we're there is a group show, complete with plasticized press release. This is the first show (guest curated) and Neil frankly doesn't know if he is going to continue. The idea of the communal library hangs vaguely in the air, as a

possibility... if... if some of the illusions of the initial plan are found again. Dug up. A workspace for Neil?... well, that probably won't happen either. Maybe a residency? Possibly. But for that, for all of that to be able to materialize, construction would have to continue... And for construction to continue you would have to go back, a few years back, to when the hard reality of hard labor could still be driven (away) by what sounded like a great plan on paper. Indeed, perhaps too much has transpired between the modernist dream team and the hippie utopians, between the sharp angles and the rounded corners, the glass door-ed institutions and the boulder gardens. If there had been a catalytic text inviting Garth and his gang to the (potentially their) library for a talk on, say, what modernist architecture could do for the desert, the discussion would probably end in a gun-fight, not in any collective dishwashing.

The unhappy but tantalizing marriage of the visible and the invisible, presence and non-presence, idealist high culture and idealist permaculture, what is purposeful and what is functional, real vs. natural? Akin somehow to urban sneaker, sophisticated vegan cafes, issues of sheetrock and the intention or transcendence of the object; to the attempt to subtract *from* in order to add *to*, intangibly? Possibly. Possibly, it all comes down to the crucial attempt at a merging of two things seemingly different in nature with a goal to make them one and the same. To a dismantling of the (semantic) limitations holding these two things separate, with an exchange of some material for other material, of some words for other words. Of washroom for restroom. And ultimately, as fellow Canadian, Erving Goffman once wrote, in order to continue to function One Simply Must Believe in The Part One Is Playing,

④ otherwise it's all a matter of wet cloths.

1 The description of *Project Series Chris D'Arcangelo Distribution*, March 5, 2005,

Paris:

*On Saturday, March 5th, Ben Kinmont and the Antinomian Press will be conducting a public publishing project from a van in front of the Louvre. This one-day publishing event will produce a small book concerning the work of Christopher D'Arcangelo, an American artist who was active primarily in New York and Los Angeles, 1974-79. D'Arcangelo's activities were focused on ideas of anarchy and how to function as an artist in a capitalistic economy. His work included construction projects in private homes (in collaboration with Peter Nadin) as well as actions within and against museums, which occurred in the Whitney, the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Louvre inside which Chris had one of his anarchy actions on 9 March 1978.*

2 Good to mention here that HDTS is a not for profit organization founded by Andrea Zittel herself, Shaun Caley Regen, Lisa Anne Auerbach, Andy Stillpass and John Conelly that (the website claims) fosters the production of work, thoughts, exchanges and experience in to order to "challenge all to expand their definition of art to take on new areas of relevancy."

3 On [Artforum.com](http://Artforum.com), on 2 June 2013, there was a 500 Words feature on Women, specifically on Connections, by that time well-underway:  
*Working under the moniker Women, designers Neil Doshi and Scott Barry are in the first phase of a five-year design initiative that sets out to inhabit a different location and set of working conditions each year. Currently underway in Yucca Valley, California, their first year, titled "Connections," will culminate in two structures integrated into the terrain's large rock formations and natural environs, remaining after completion as a design residency and library...*

4 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Random House, 1959.

