

Becket

Flannery

Abecedarium

Roland Barthes organized his *A Lover's Discourse* as a series of short chapters, each prompted by a particular word in alphabetical order. There are many examples of abecedaria in artistic and critical texts (e.g., Krauss and Bois' *Formless*), so I don't feel self-conscious borrowing the schema here. What I find interesting about Barthes' use of it is how he moves against the grain of its traditional "A is for apple" didacticism: he employs it to *disorder* his discourse, to prevent pure chance from asserting some hidden and involuntary logic ("for we must not, one mathematician tells us, 'underestimate the power of chance to engender monsters'..."). Perhaps this is why he feels comfortable skipping over certain letters completely (there is nothing, apparently, in the lover's lexicon that corresponds to the letter "B" ... alas), an offense no child's alphabet book would dare commit. It is, nonetheless, the logic of the abecedarium to bring things into unlikely proximity, across the fragile boundaries of alphabetized sections, of what separates Vywer (noun, obs., *Viewer*) and Wa (interjection, obs., *Woe*).

Donald Duck

I always felt like Donald Duck was the example *par excellence* of the arbitrariness of the sign. I think it stems from seeing him in a textbook on postmodern art, somewhere in a David Salle painting (Google cannot provide evidence of the existence of such a painting, which either confirms that not everything is on the internet, or that my memory retroactively invented this painting; there is, however, one Salle work [*B.A.M.F.V.*, 1983] in which a wizened, strung-out Donald sucks on a cigarette while clutching a drink). In the US, Donald Duck was always second string to Mickey Mouse, and I reckon less popular even than Goofy; but as an export product, he found his footing in the wake of American culture's imperial reach, and his wide-spread popularity in post-war Europe remade him into something quite different from the frankly annoying American version. German artists in particular seemed interested in this imported signifier. By the time Isa Genzken began using figurines from the Duckverse in her post 9/11 sculptures (exhibited in New York at her MoMA retrospective in 2014), you could say it was just the German-speaking water birds from Entenhausen coming home to roost.

Hats

In Tirza Kater's *With this scribbled grooming we thatch ourselves anew*, four fellows pose for a photograph in front of a stone wall. The photograph,

clearly analog, carries a false historicity: the men's fedoras point towards the *Mad Men* era, but the photograph (like *Mad Men* itself) is from the 2000s. If history were a cartoon desert highway, this image would be the scenic painting that the coyote plants in the middle of the street, extending by one-point perspective the apparent distance of the road/time. A mossy stone, placed near the print, confirms: we do not pass, like the road-runner, through the image, but rather it approaches us.

Intimacy

In *T.M. / T.M.* (p.28, p.25), Tim Mathijsen has traced a drawing of a young girl onto plaster embedded on fabric. The original illustration was from a comic book drawn by his grandfather (with whom he shares his initials), re-enacting his hand movements decades later on the plaster's surface; but actually, the image is transferred into the plaster while still wet, making the image a trace of his tracing. The fabric onto which the plaster has set is a secondhand duvet from a hotel. It hangs over a folding screen, the type used to divide a room or provide some cover while changing clothes. The screen could be a metonym for the hotel itself, its ready-made privacy. Therein lies the hotel's appeal: it is intimate, yet anonymous.

Mirror

I had seen Arnoud Holleman's painting *MOM/WOW* hanging in Tirza's apartment a few times. It was almost strange to see it on a gallery wall, a kind of inversion of my reaction to Louise Lawler's photos of classic pieces of modernism hung next to tureens and Empire style lamps. The work is unusual in Holleman's oeuvre, and is actually a free interpretation of a 19th century Realist painting by Matthijs Maris entitled *De Kennismaking (Het geitje)* in the Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Holleman appends the word "MOM" to the hat worn by a stooping figure, and its visual inversion "WOW" to the hind parts of the titular goat, but otherwise he leaves the basic forms of Maris' painting intact. The only exception is the maternal figure's hand, which is articulated in much more detail than the original, its finger extending into an unnaturally long gesture, as if to emphasize the deictic nature of the painting itself, not only to *De Kennismaking*, but to language's own tendency to point towards a meaning that is infinitely deferred. Occupying the center of the painting, the hand becomes the pivot between mother and goat, and the mirror through which MOM and WOW reflect each other.

Mom

I find it hard to read the word “wow” without irony. Like: wow. Oddly, once when I was recording a script with a British performer, she said more or less the same thing about the word “mom.”

Population

Already in the 20th century artists and writers speculated on expanding the archive beyond the confines of a physical depot. Of course there's Borges, but also Malraux's *Musée imaginaire* (1947), a boundary-less collection of all existing images. As early as 1928, Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote of Lenin that any real portrait must consist of every snapshot of him ever taken, distributed across newspapers, magazines, archives, posters, etc. The vast quantities of images available today are much closer to this “museum without walls” than to the traditional collections stored on microfiche. David Joselit used the term “image population” to describe how such a sea of images is navigated, referencing the statistical abstraction of the population, a fluid database within which sets can be formed by any number of search terms, metadata, or linguistic prompts, such as “beardless Abe Lincoln,” “sexy Abe Lincoln,” “shirtless sexy Abe Lincoln,” etc. For each of us, typing a statistically improbable phrase yields an ever more singular and personal collection.

Snow

Many of Willem Oorebeek's works draw from his personal archive of printed images, culled from newspapers and magazines. After printing the images, layers of color are applied over the images, lending an egg-shell finish to the works that reminds me of the surface of a car dashboard. The titles of Oorebeek's works point, in a similar manner as the hand in Holleman's painting, towards something just off-target: *Emmilou* refers to an image of Emmylou Harris, and the small dots that cover the image of Michael Jackson in *MJ, snow* are not snowflakes, but marks made by the artist. These titles gesture towards, but not quite at, their referent.

Telos

Something happened in the late 90s or early 00s, around the time that “the postmodern” was being supplanted by “the contemporary,” to the notion of the virtual: the ludic play of the former gave way to a kind of teleological time. Maybe it happened when Marshall McLuhan was anointed the prophet of the digital revolution in the first issue of *Wired* magazine (McLuhan himself was already 13 years dead, and his work had fallen out of wide discussion much earlier, so *Wired* commissioned Stuart Brand and Camille Paglia [!] to do the work of reinventing him for the networked age). Postmodernism's supposed lack of master narratives had paradoxically ended in a proliferation of them, whether apocalyptic or utopian, fascistic or revolutionary, informed by McLuhan's Catholic faith. Somehow the anti-historicism of the postmodern had transformed into the vertiginous, yet ineluctable pull

of futurity upon the present. It turns out virtuality has a *telos* after all.

Virtual

The unusual shape of Elaine Sturtevant's career gives me pause. Why did recognition for her project come so late? What had changed in society that made her work suddenly legible? You could imagine in Sturtevant's case that it was the advent of appropriation that supplied the intellectual framework to interpret her remaking of other artists' works, but the 70s and 80s were relatively quiet for Sturtevant. Appropriation's signature action – the framing and the cut of the camera – is not characteristic of most of Sturtevant's works. Rather, she built her remakes from the inside, learning their techniques well enough to reproduce the results, as if tinkering with the “code” of a Beuys or a Warhol until she got it right. It was actually in the 2000s that critical attention on her work picked up, just as she had begun to work digitally herself. Without assuming a crude Hegelianism, is it fair to ask if there was something virtual about Sturtevant's very material remakes that made them finally visible to the culture at large? And what role might she play as our retrospective ancestor?

Wink

The title of the exhibition, *I wink, I blink, I close my eyes*, is taken from the chapter of Barthes' text about “connivance.” Barthes takes the word down to its Latin root, *connivere*, the definition of which supplies the tripartite phrase. The optical movements listed imply a range of possible figurative meanings, spanning from a familiar, even conspiratorial wink, to an intentional ignorance, turning a blind eye. Intimate, yet anonymous. I can map this list of actions onto a variety of approaches the artists in *I wink, I blink, I close my eyes* take to images, whether overt acknowledgment (wink), a reflexive response (blink), or some form of erasure (I close my eyes). If there is a connivance in this exhibition, it is among artworks – between ones that are present and those that are not, between copies and originals, between versions and their inversions.