

To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically, minded—over and beyond an inherent love of the general many colored pictures of things—is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper themselves to give out: to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and detailed as to be moved to a report of the matter.

HENRY JAMES

3. Or again, instead of trying to define the other (“What is he”), I turn to myself: “What do I want, wanting to know you?” What would happen if I decided to define you as a force and not as a person? And if I were to situate myself as another force confronting yours?

ROLAND BARTHES

Package Factory (Natural Marriage of Natural Resources) explores the process of making card-backed blister packages, used for selling batteries, toys, chapstick, pens, and a great many other quotidian items. Like most of the objects or processes BR engages with in his sculptures, a blister pack is so ubiquitous as to be invisible. Even the pointing out of its name, that it has a name—blister package—is to shine a light into dark corners of our world that are ignored for efficiency, for sanity. He has broken down this process into the following four steps: the making of flexography ink, the making of paperboard, the making of the plastic polyethylene terephthalate, and the making of graphic design decisions. They are bound together in a game of chutes and ladders.

A commercial package is a site of complex social compromise. It's a restrictive membrane, a sealed paywall seeming to contain an untouched, irreducibly special substance, whatever the product. As gatekeeper it's authoritative (apparently there for practical reasons,) delimiting a basic, daily space of desire...

BENJAMIN REISS

BR begins projects with a period of extensive research, which has as much to do with

trying to piece together a complete picture of the mechanics and mechanisms of these often obscure processes as it does with engaging with the dry language of didactic material. The attempt to understand begins here—with rigorous research into the science that is only helped along and not defined by a delight in the accidental poetics of definitions, diagrams, and scientific explanations. What became first apparent is the sheer difficulty of accessing these processes, which make up a hidden yet essential layer of activity in the functioning of our world. Our daily remove from the industrial, chemical, and otherwise basic yet outsourced processes becomes a central concern. The rigor necessary to even attempt to bridge this gap reveals our constant and unconscious distancing from the mundane, the ugly, and the destructive. Popularized or even linear explanations don't exist for most of these systems; they had to be pieced together and BR's sources range from academic papers to the websites of companies specializing in discrete industrial processes.

Why do some systems feel like golems, untethered to founding intentions? I'm not all cynical, despite the monster reference. Structures of compromise bind us together and can be exquisite contortions of subtlety, genius, and sacrifice. I wonder, though, when compromise accommodates millions, whether the expression of an individual's desire is diluted to abstraction, unrecognizably flimsy, fleeting.

BENJAMIN REISS

Such sources, along with straightforward descriptions when they can be found, become the didactic foundation for the poetic and metaphoric tangents that guide BR's own processing. The formation of metaphors becomes lubricant for the ingestion of concepts. Swallowing information to digest knowledge.

This leads to what we must call the Poetics of the Encyclopedic image, if we agree to define Poetics as the sphere of the infinite vibrations of meaning, at the center of which is placed the literal object. We can say that there is not one plate of the Encyclopedia which fails to vibrate well beyond its demonstrative intent. This singular vibration is above all an astonishment. Of course, the Encyclopedic image is always clear, but in a deeper region of ourselves, beyond the intellect, or at least in its profile, certain questions are born and exceed us. Consider the astonishing image of man reduced to his network of veins; here anatomical boldness unites with the greater poetic and philosophic interrogation: What is it? A thousand names rise up, dissolving each other: a tree, a bear, a monster, a hair shirt, a fabric, everything which overflows the human silhouette, distends it, draws it toward regions remote from itself, makes it overstep the divisions of Nature; yet, just as in the sketch of a master, the swarm of pencil strokes finally resolves into a pure and exact form, perfectly signifying, so here all the vibrations of meaning concur to impose a certain idea of the object...

ROLAND BARTHES

BR's work could be described as an exploration of the mechanics of understanding but he would probably call it our limited capacity to understand, or even the failure of understanding. Intimate relational, political, economic, and emotional frameworks are built into a complex body for containing and constructing knowledge. His mother's nose sculpted from memory, a stopwatch from childhood, a "living royal infant" lifted from Malevich, and other such "anecdotes, stories, and lies that form around a subject and help to position it someplace"¹ are scattered throughout the factory.

BR has an incredible capacity for linguistic and visual puns, for word play, image play. More than cheap tricks, they belie a flexibility in his apprehension of the world, an alchemical ability to liquefy a thing's structure or representation to give it a new and stranger form. For BR, playing is like knowing in that they are both "means of rehearsing primal and possible selves at a safe remove from the world." It freaks him out as much as it fuels him.

I cannot hope to seize the concept of it except "by the tail": by flashes, formulas, surprises of expression, scattered through the great stream of the Image-Repertoire; I am in love's wrong place, which is its dazzling place.

ROLAND BARTHES

BR and I recently saw Gustave Moreau's *Salome Dancing Before Herod* in a Los Angeles museum. We spent a long time looking at it. I don't remember his exact phrasing, but he eventually observed that Moreau must have been moralizing decadence, that the extreme abundance of jewels and flowers and textures of richness and Salome's ambiguous allure could only have been a condemnation of this luxury. For a moment I felt ashamed of my own luxuriating in the painting. I remembered this a few days later during a conversation in his studio. The PET ladder showing crude oil's journey to polyethylene terephthalate alludes to the visual language of the modernist synagogues of BR's childhood, perhaps most obviously in the color-coded distillation column. Along the side of this column are "bronze" icons indicating the uses for the different distillates (roofs and roads, ships, jet fuel, plastic, etc.) The network of machines, facilities, and processes blossomed into a "garden of delightful fruit," whose beauty for BR exacerbates his shame in the privileged remove of seeing these extremely destructive forces as symbols or diagrams. Not yet metaphor, they are vehicles for information but not sentiment or experience.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who fashioned man with wisdom, and created within him many openings and many cavities. It is obvious and known before Your throne of glory, that if but one of them were to be ruptured, or but one of them were to be blocked, it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You. Blessed are You, God, Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.

¹ Peter Wachtler on his own work, quoted here: Schillinger, Jakob. "Interiority Complex: Jakob Schillinger on the Art of Peter Wachtler." *Artforum*, vol. 53, no. 3, Nov. 2014.

This is a translation of a Jewish blessing recited after urination or excretion. BR and I are fascinated by it.

The graphic design decision-making ladder begins with carrots: their growth stages and processing into baby carrots, their consumption and digestion by the graphic designer who uses them as fuel. BR speaks of the varying attention excesses and deficits that guide his understandings. This was the ladder I could most intuitively understand, because I have something of an attention excess to questions of ingestion and digestion.

For me, consumption has everything to do with understanding. I recognize that there is, of course, a limited capacity in the knowledge we choose and the knowledge we retain. The enormity of the world is such that we would die of the roar were we to try to know and see and feel it all at once. I remember BR telling me how he began making the sculpture *Jet Engine* (2016). We had often talked about the feeling of Saturday afternoons during our Los Angeles childhoods, a specific nostalgia that certain tricks of light or the sound of wind chimes could conjure up. He described hearing jet engines passing overhead, another phenomenon so ubiquitous as to be invisible. He spoke of this sound as soothing background noise, like wind in the trees. Jets passing over LA natives playing in their yards. He went on to talk about this sound as one of violence—the sound of American imperialism, the sound of incredible environmental damage. But how could you let yourself feel those things, ongoing war and our collective carbon footprint, every time you heard a plane passing? A healthy brain has an incredible capacity to forget as well as retain.

Now, what we have said about landscapes in dreams can be applied also to an actual landscape, seen and selected by an automatic response of the unconscious, which detects in it an affinity that gives us pause and makes us return to it again and again.

J.E. CIRLOT

Selective knowledge, for BR, is perhaps the heart of the problem. For me, it's just the heart.

I've written elsewhere about approaching art as a selfish lover. By no means encyclopedic, not quite specialized, but desirous. Voraciously, greedily, consummately. This is the only way I know how to know.

Nothing has an essence of its own, but is what it is only in relation to all that is around. This awareness is often unconscious, sometimes highly philosophical and sophisticated, liberating or embarrassing. Each shift, each bend of one's

MARTHA RONK

body turns out to be related to the potency of objects. Sometimes, objects create violent disturbances, especially those occurring by “chance”...

The workers manning the assembly areas on the top of the sculpture were among the very last elements to be made. Almost everything is handmade, which itself becomes a process of knowing through the body—an extended and intimate engagement with the materials used and represented. BR and I spoke on the phone one evening while he made their tiny hands. He said they were becoming something unexpected. Soon after I saw the finished sculpture. The little worker-men were haunting, fixed in their eternal tasks of processing and making.

The man who contemplates is ‘absorbed’ by what he contemplates; the ‘knowing subject’ ‘loses’ himself in the object that is known... The man who is ‘absorbed’ by the object that he is contemplating can be ‘brought back to himself’ only by a Desire; by the desire to eat, for example.... Desire is what transforms Being, revealed to itself by itself in (true) knowledge... revealed to a ‘subject’... The (human) I is the I of a Desire or of Desire.

ALEXANDRE KOJÉVE

I think about making to understand. I think about choosing to understand. I think about selecting entry points into the wider world. I think about intimacy and knowing the world via an initial other. I know a lot about blister packages now.

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