

Network Fatigue

BY PABLO LARIOS

How artists are reclaiming the local and personal and resisting image circulation through ephemerality and collaboration



Tobias Madison, *No; No; H*, 2013, Performance documentation, Kunsthalle Zürich. Courtesy: the artist & Kunsthalle Zürich

For a couple of years now I've leafed sporadically, with little dedication yet substantial pleasure through a matte-white artist's book. Its author, Juliette Blightman, is named only on a cookie-fortune sized sticker that will soon fall off the cover. There are no photos of her work inside. Printed on each page in small, serif font is a date (Saturday 19 December 2009), city (Berlin) and a calm, present-tense précis of a performance or spare installation: 'to the left as you walk in is ... a mirror, which came from Adam and Heather's home... the replacement one I gave them after walking into their mirror and breaking it when I came home from a party on 18 October 2008 – not even drunk.'

Elliptical yet detailed, Blightman's descriptions are immediate not through confessional histrionics but from a near-therapeutic candor and her recourse to a veiled, if intimate, community of collaborators. The particularity of Blightman's works, their seeming indifference to anyone outside the artist's own circle (artists, gallerists, father, daughter, her friend and mentor Cerith Wyn Evans), is almost unjustifiable along traditional criteria for aesthetic judgement. Such criteria seek to subsume particulars into universals; art that isn't generalizable

seems exclusive and uncomfortable or, like someone else's dreams, simply boring. Still, when I pick up *Scripts and Descriptions 2005–2010* (2011), I find myself genuinely moved, even if Adam and Heather mean nothing to me and I've never been physically present at any of these exhibitions. Scripts generally precede an artwork, and descriptions come after. Here, these texts frame the artwork as a vanished middle, a kind of ghost shirking representation or reproduction – something both emotionally present and vitally gone. Behind all artworks is a web of social relations, personal artifacts and spatial-temporal contexts. What lends Blightman's work its improbable amity is how she asserts hers without the impulse to gloss or elucidate. Perhaps this turning-away has to do with how the works, too, deal with things that disappear – friends, afternoon light, plants, records, love. Reading these texts is like watching snow melt in one's hand.

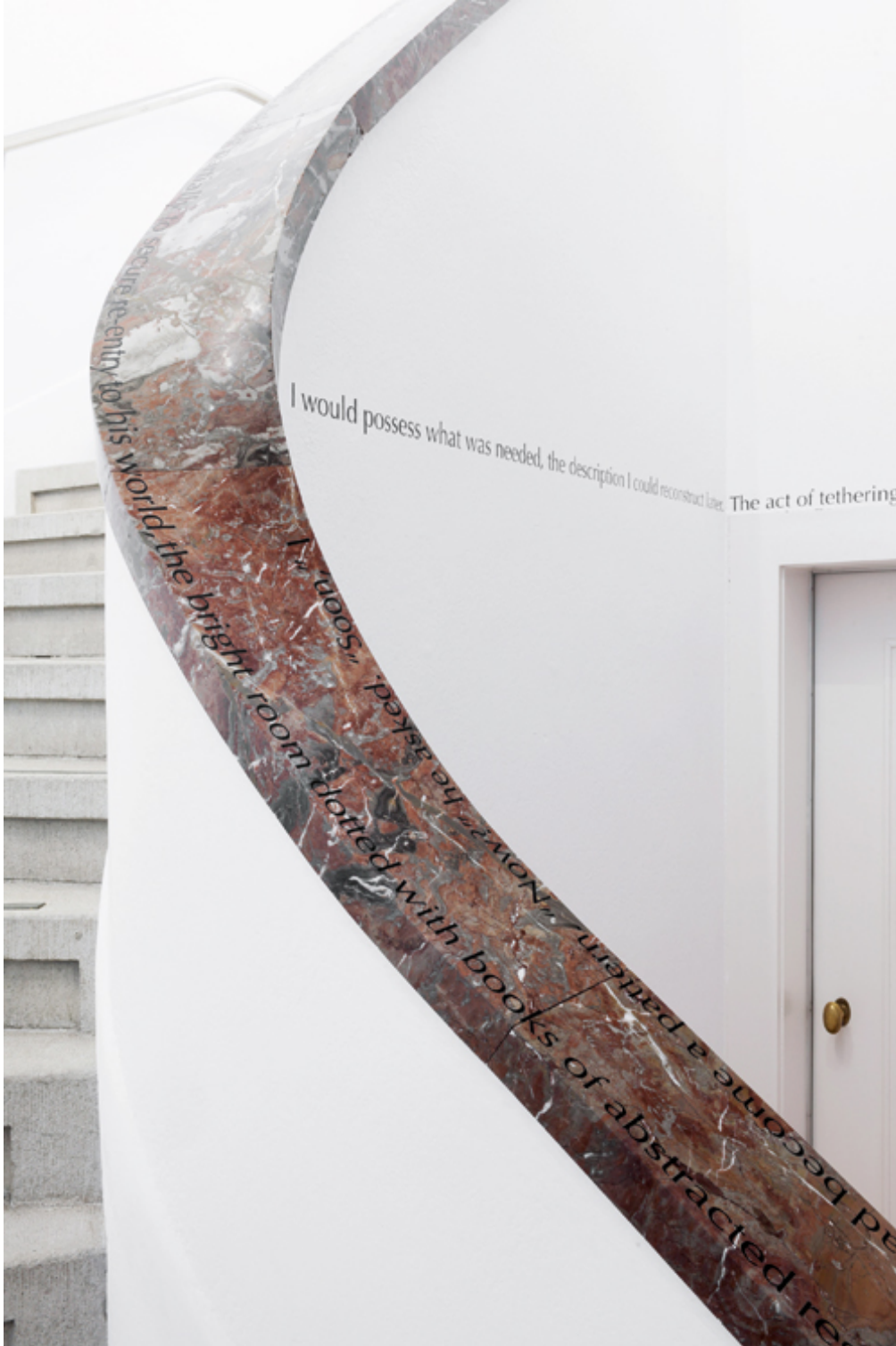


Juliette Blightman, *New York*, 2008, 2011, Curtains, house plant and wall label, Installation view, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. Courtesy: the artist & Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

Blightman's work – ephemeral, personal and collaborative – stands contrary to most of the impulses determining mainstream image circulation today. Masked behind the restrained poetics of her installations is a **fatigue of the network and its departicularizing demands of generalizability and repetition**. Blightman's seemingly gentle scenes are actually irate invectives against much defining today's image culture: the sublation of images into data, emotions to unidirectional venting, art to circulation, form to format, artist to brand, and value to speculation. As exhibition viewing makes its clumsy, amphibian crawl online, the reciprocal pressure on artists has, palpably, been one of coercion within the doxa of digital circulation and image saturation: recognizability, translatability, clarity. More exhibitions are seen now than ever – but also fewer. The JPEG threatens to level the artwork into a flat, ethereal data-stream, while paradoxes like documentation preceding physical exhibition come to seem benign. Sleekness is commonplace, almost accidental. HD is unremarkable and on every storefront.

For a while now the artwork has been losing. David Joselit's *After Art* (2013) examines the forces of late capitalism's deterministic image circulation. He supplants the artwork – already 'belonging to a network' – with the category of 'image-power' that corresponds to an image's commodity and exchange status. Comparing the 'emergent' image to a 'swarm of bees', for Joselit, 'it is saturation through mass circulation... that now produces value in and through images.' Let's face it: the situation is bleak; it's the result of a neoliberal conquest that has upheaved not only artworks but our lived environments and personal relations. How can

image-resistance create new images, and how can these images sustain value and real intimacy after trust has been corporately ruptured?



Lena Henke & Calla Henkel, *Science Fiction*, 2014, Wall text, installation view,
Kunsthalle Bern. Courtesy the artists
& Kunsthalle Bern

It's precisely Joselit's understanding of image power, which reduces an artwork to a page 'hit', that a cluster of artists – admittedly, working in Berlin or Switzerland and thus proximate to my own working and social conditions – seek to undercut, opting collaboratively for a resistant ephemerality that claims the personal against swarming circulation. Network fatigue is the image's prior admission of its own defeat before the matrix of connectivity. It constructs small mechanisms of temporary exclusion – what used to be called privacy, and which is partly, though not entirely, closed – to counter larger, widespread ones that occurred under the spectre of the 'network' and 'the social', but which only served to exclude us from ourselves. Network fatigue privileges the temporary, the contingent, and the to-hand – simply, the people and things around you – sealing

off something real and personal before a work's assumed, and perhaps inevitable, reentrance into the digital agora.

Mobilizing personal relations, artists of network fatigue such as Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff, Tobias Madison, Carissa Rodriguez, Emmanuel Rossetti, among others, work in temporary, reconfigurable groups whose results are site-specific and whose relationship to documentation is poised and slow (if still strategic). Swiss artist Madison – who co-ran a space in Basel and a club and a cinema in Zurich – included artists Rossetti and Stefan Tcherepnin in recent solo exhibitions at the Modern Institute in Glasgow, the Hepworth Wakefield and The Power Station in Dallas; the locus of authorial agency here was defiantly fuzzy. It was with characteristically puerile though refreshing humour that after his 'solo' show at the Kunsthalle Zürich last year – actually comprising two exhibitions, remnants from artist-run spaces and works by, among others, Rossetti, Henkel and Pitegoff – Madison submitted a series of dark, unfocused party photos to the blog Contemporary Art Daily following a request for images of Madison's show. Published online, the gesture wrested power away from the expectations of glossy, well-lit images for remote online viewing and back to the local, imperfect and temporary. The flip side to this – flip in both senses – might be that publicized intimacy is itself a way of fostering cult value: a gesture toward implied or real exclusivity. But it's crucial to distinguish a network from the network, since, as Facebook has taught us, the network as a series of small, personal links is its best illusion.

If the insistence on friendship – an index of connection and particularity – is uncomfortable because it is necessarily exclusive, then perhaps this discomfort really arises from the culture that confused connectivity with 'friendship,' and betrayed the latter. As we wade in some marsh of technology and affect, where social relations, communicability and privacy, intimacy and sharing have been so thoroughly upheaved, I'm disinclined to feel excited about any kind of network – social, technological, artistic, they're all the same now anyway. Yet in this same context, old illusions of insularity, privacy and ephemerality – dark rooms or broken cups, bad or blurry photographs, simple meals – attain a surprising import and immediacy.



Matthew Lutz-Kinoy & Natsuko Uchino, *Keramikos 2*, 2013, Ceramic banquet set and tablecloth, Installation view, Kunsthalle Baden-Baden. Courtesy: the artists & Kunsthalle Baden-Baden

Take Matthew Lutz-Kinoy and Natsuko Uchino's staging of performative, invite-only dinners on ceramics (*Keramikos*, 2012–ongoing) in project spaces like Elaine in Basel, or sound artist Sergei Tcherepnin's work with Ei Arakawa and Arakawa's work with Nora Schultz (both MoMA, 2012). Forging their own contexts – while aware

of larger ones – these artists assert the intrapersonal as a back door to the cold machinations of a forceful, neoliberal techno-capitalism. These processes sometimes deal with the old relational topoi of viewers-as-users, food or live music (musician Paolo Thorsen-Nagel and artist Tobias Spichtig's sound performances) but they're a way to wrest social relations outside the cold social complexes of Palo Alto and back into lived, transient microcommunities of activity. These approaches borrow from the lo-fi, makeshift poetic confessionalism of Josef Strau as well as the small, intense social networks of Cologne in the 1990s – Stephan Dilleuth and Strau's storefront/artist's bar/gallery *Friesenwall 120*, for example. In its collaborative insistence, network fatigue harkens to the communitarian working methods of Kai Althoff, or Cosima von Bonin and her cross-pollination of roles, contexts and invitations, such as in 1991 at Andrea Rosen in New York, where von Bonin invited her friends to produce works for her own solo show. At the First Grazer Fächerfest (1995) von Bonin invited DJs, sculptors and a theatre production in order to 'bring along the whole beautiful fan.' Unlike previous collaborative models – of a Paweł Althamer, say, taking recourse to participation and larger structures of identity – or the in situ seatedness of relational aesthetics, these artists shirk a rhetoric of inclusivity: that faux-democratizing impulse now equated with the conquest of big data.



Set of the play *Farming in Europe*, 2013, Written by Calla Henkel, Pablo Larios, Max Pitegoff & Dena Yago Set design and elements by Olga Balema, Vittorio Brodmann, Yngve Holen, Tobias Madison & Emanuel Rossetti, New Theater, Berlin. Courtesy: New Theater, Berlin

This summer, the group show *Revelry* curated by Tenzing Barshee at the Kunsthalle Bern asked 'how a personal ... art practice belong[s] in an interconnected world, saturated with overlaid points of references.' Blightman was included with a video-collage of her daughter (2012, 2014) and drawings and an installation (*Interiority and the Exterior*, 2014) and Heike Karin-Föll exhibited scans and a video of a years-long, diaristic practice of notebooking. The wall text *Science Fiction* (2014) by Calla Henkel and Lena Henke recounted Henkel photographing her then-husband in the now-closed Times Bar, which she co-ran in Berlin, while considering the upheavals and fragility of a long distance relationship in spite of, and through, documentation: 'with the image

I would possess what was needed, the description I could reconstruct later. The act of tethering intangibles: light and affection'. This emotional, quasi-confessional text – 'gossip, yes, but also true. Sentimental to the point of fiction' – was installed in vinyl lettering beginning at the Kunsthalle Bern's foyer, making its way down to the basement. It trailed down a curved, marble staircase railing so that visitors could read the text while proceeding to the Kunsthalle's basement gallery but so that no one photograph would be able to completely document the piece.



Julien Ceccaldi, Display case for the play *It's Just Us*, 2014 at New Theater, Berlin. 2 Courtesy: the artist & New Theater, Berlin

Network fatigue shirks from the recapitulating force of documentation while smudging the lines of authorship and subverting the easy ossification of aesthetic identity into a brand. It accepts the inevitable failures that result from collaborative practices. Network fatigue leads to a – perhaps illusionary – state of refuge outside that network, using community as solidarity and avoiding the authorial responsibility of representational legibility – be that to gallery, institution, or distribution format. These makeshift formations gain an unconventional grace when they frame personally and temporarily what seemed only expressible generally.

Henkel and Pitegoff run the New Theater in Berlin, where for the past year they have worked collaboratively with artists and writers – myself included – on short, short-lived, lo-fi plays that shirk documentation. The plays' audience is limited and their viewings are almost purely on-site. There is no Vimeo-accessible film of *It's Just Us* (2014), for which Julien Ceccaldi acted with his cartoon cutouts, and little documentation of *Farming in Europe* (2013), the play I co-authored, for which Yngve Holen provided a kitchen setup and Vittorio

Brodmann the painting backdrop. The list of collaborators is long and shifting – printed, temporarily, on a collage-like display case outside the theatre front. Berlin already has a dedicated, highly active, experimental theatre scene, and it's partly the New Theater's defiant amateurism that lends it value. Reinstating art's real, lived affectivity – material, grubby, shoddy – the project resists art's slick sublation into image-power. The decision to ask artists and writers – none of whom has a background in theatre – to construct and act in plays is a refreshing mode of ego-subversion. We welcome the freeing opportunity to unmask from our own brands and enter a perhaps short-lived – and shrinking – sense of authorial autonomy within the collective forces that seek to make us all the same.

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First published in Issue 16

September - November 2014

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