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GARETH LONG, 'WHO INVENTED THE DESK?' THE APARTMENT, VANCOUVER, 4 SEPTEMBER 2010 – 1 MARCH 2011; ARTIST'S TEXT; ONGOING PUBLIC WORKSHOPS AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS; ONGOING SERIES OF ARTIST'S PUBLICATIONS

Reviewed by Erika Balsom

Who invented the desk? Well, no one, really. For Toronto-born, New York-based artist Gareth Long, the lack of a singular moment of invention does not prevent the question from opening up a rich enquiry, enabling him to address notions of cultural production, artistic labour, iterative process and post-studio practice. 'Who Invented The Desk?' is a question that seeks to provoke discussion rather than call for a resolution. It is the title of an exhibition at the project space, The Apartment, in Vancouver, but it is also a framework for public workshops and conversations and an ongoing series of publications. It is something of a pretext, a generative mechanism that sets into motion collaborations, hypotheses, and encounters – all whilst knowing that its search for an inventor will forever remain in vain and largely beside the point.

Long became interested in this question when he noticed that a significant number of visitors to his website were directed there after entering the phrase 'Who invented the desk' as a Google search term. As the producer of a series of sculptures entitled *Bouvard and Pécuchet's Invented Desk for Copying* (2007–present), based on Gustave Flaubert's final, uncompleted novel, Long easily understood how such a thing could occur. Some quick research made it clear that in fact no one person 'invented' the desk. But recognizing the relevance of this question to his own practice, which has for some time investigated issues of translation, writing and the copy – all activities that most often take place at a desk – Long made use of a residency at The Apartment to turn this curious occurrence into an exhibition and a short text. In the text, Long claims that the desk was never invented as a distinct form, but rather emerged out of a discursive shift from 'table'; in other words, the desk is summoned into being as soon as one sits down at it with intentions towards a specific kind of activity, one that is for Long linked to a kind of production broadly termed cultural.

For the exhibition originating from this residency, Long presented a series of documents of his working process. Eschewing finished products, the exhibition offered a smattering of objects and images tied to larger projects already underway. Though the artist has made, for example, thirteen iterations of the two-seated desk described near the end of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, none appeared in the exhibition at The Apartment. Instead, two diagrams of then unrealized iterations of the project appeared alongside their negative image, produced from the blue carbon-copy paper on which they were drawn. One, designed by Liam Gillick, will remain forever unrealized; the other, designed by Long, has since been fabricated for an Artexte event in Montreal. A photo entitled *Hopefully Not Victor's Cat* (2010) – Victor being a minor character from *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a child adopted by the pair who boils his cat, explaining, 'Why shouldn't I? It's mine!' – shows a small kitten hovering over a model for a third two-person desk later constructed for Shandy Hall in Yorkshire. There were diagrams, photos, books, even a custom-made *piñata* of a desk – but no

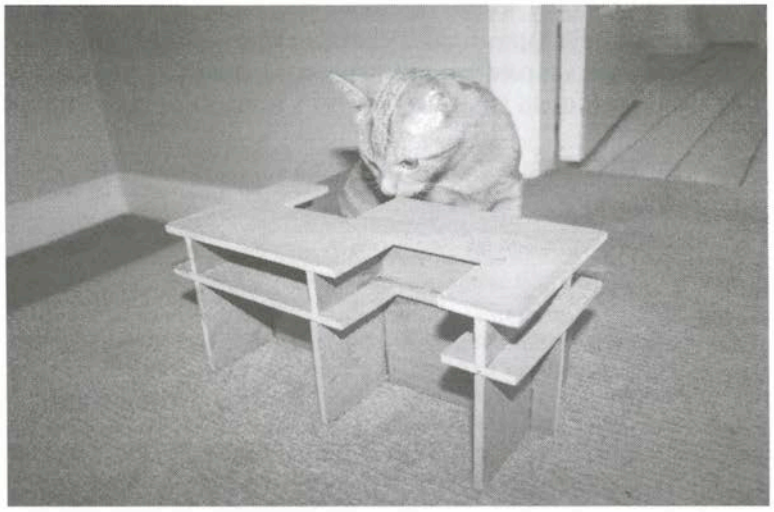

Figure 1: Gareth Long, Hopefully Not Victor's Cat. *(2010) Courtesy of the artist.*

desks. *Bouvard and Pécuchet's Invented Desk for Copying* served as a structuring absence in the exhibition, being everywhere and nowhere at once. Troubling conventional centre-periphery relations, the exhibition simply banished what one might have thought to be its focal point.

Long has been producing the desk-sculptures since 2007, collaborating with fabricators who loosely base their constructions on drawings he provides. In the exhibition, the artist embraces the opportunity to explore how this method of production (artist working with fabricator) is adopted not simply because it has been de rigueur in the art world since the 1960s, but also because it constitutes an integral part of the meaning of the finished work. As in Flaubert's novel, in this production process one encounters an act of collaboration that is also an act of unfaithful copying. The supplement to the *Invented Desk for Copying* provided by the ancillary materials included in the 'Who Invented The Desk?' exhibition highlights that the same notion of iteration at play across the series of thirteen desks also occurs at the level of production, as the desk is 'invented' first by Bouvard and Pécuchet, again by its designer, and once more by its fabricator. In line with the critique of authorship and interest in translation that have informed earlier works such as *Don Quixote* (2006) and *Video Solid* (2006/2008), here Long suggests the double impossibility of locating a stable point of origin for artistic creation and of engaging in any form of repetition that would not also be a production of difference. Moreover, following Long's assertion that the desk is only called into being when one sits down at it with a particular purpose – otherwise it is a mere table – new inventions of the desk will always lie ahead, their precise character to be determined in conjunction with the uses to which the form is put. This means that in this context, to ask 'Who invented the desk?' is also to ask 'Who is the author of this work? Who invented *these* desks? And who will continue to invent them in the future?' At stake here is a radical destabilization of the discrete object of sculpture, a suggestion that the *Invented Desk for Copying* signifies not by virtue of its material facticity as form, but rather

Figure 2: Gareth Long, cover of Who Invented the Desk. *Volume 2 (2010) Courtesy of the artist.*

generates meaning out of the complex series of collaborations and encounters that lead to and follow from the moment of its inception. This disruption of the sculptural object is compounded by the fact that the desks are not simply forms to be contemplated but retain their status as functional furniture, as everyday desks, when they are used for talks, at art fairs, or as a place for Long to work.

If there is a master text at work in this exhibition, it is surely *Bouvard and Pécuchet* and not Long's own text, *Who invented the desk?*, which was composed while in residence at The Apartment but was not included in the exhibition sharing its title. Flaubert's novel informs the desk diagrams as well as two artist's books included in the exhibition: a modified paperback edition of the book into which Long has inserted his own preface, and galleys of *The Illustrated Dictionary of Received Ideas* (2009–ongoing). Made in collaboration with Derek Sullivan, the latter project translates and illustrates Flaubert's posthumously published compendium of bourgeois clichés, which may have been intended as an appendix to *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. From Vancouver to Brussels and in between, the artists have carried out this work seated at various iterations of the *Invented Desk for Copying*, thereby rendering Bouvard and Pécuchet's fictional labours into a real activity and (re)inventing the desk in the process.

Despite the clear centrality of the novel to this cycle of projects, it remains somewhat ironic to characterize Flaubert's text as anyone's master text given the sustained critique of mastery found within it. The titular characters leave their jobs as copy clerks and retreat to the provinces to conquer various branches of knowledge with exclusive recourse to the authority of books. At the slightest difficulty – at the moment when a tension arises between the

clean order of the library and the messiness of the world – or the slightest hint of boredom, the pair abandon their task and begin another. Finally, in the novel's closing pages, when they have exhausted all possible topics and definitively failed in their encyclopaedic learning, the two return to what they had spent their lives doing and, in effect, had never ceased to do in their efforts to gain competence in the areas of food preservation, grammar and gymnastics, among many others: they copy. They enact a suffocating expansion of the space of the book, to the point that it becomes coterminous with the entirety of their existence – but in doing so, they reverse into the stupidity of mere regurgitation.

How does this idea of cultural production relate to Long's practice? Both share a deep suspicion of originality and a clear investment in the domain of things already said, already written. Though operating far from the obsession with found materials that has pervaded much recent media art, Long consistently turns to an existing source – often literary – as the basis for producing new work. When Long and Sullivan take their places at an *Invented Desk for Copying* to illustrate *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, they self-fashion as a latter-day Bouvard and Pécuchet, illustrating the dictionary not by spontaneously creating drawings but by copying those images that appear on a Google search for the term in question. Where the nineteenth-century duo submitted themselves to the heavy weight of the library, the twenty-first-century pair relinquishe imagination for the chaotic babble of the Internet: the same gesture, adjusted for historical specificity. Long parts ways with Flaubert's copyists, though, in his embrace of the inevitable infidelity that arises in the process of copying. Bouvard and Pécuchet abandon each of their subjects out of frustration that they are not able to produce results that equal those described in books. For Long, by contrast, it is exactly this gap between model and copy, the improper reception of the received idea, that is of greatest interest. Like the 'two nobodies' (as Flaubert named Bouvard and Pécuchet in the novel's original title), Long avoids the arrogance of *ex nihilo* creation and engages in something of a self-abrogation before the archive. But unlike them, he gleans a heroic kernel from the tedium of repetition, finding within it a sincerity, a sense of purpose and the possibility of calling forth the truly new.

There are, of course, desks other than the two-seated desk for copying. Who invented those? The periodical titled *Who Invented The Desk?* puts Long's text on the subject into conversation with multiple contributors, thereby expanding the scope of the inquiry. The first volume contains reproductions of diagrams for several iterations of the *Invented Desk for Copying*, but it largely departs from 'Flaubert's parrots' to instead ruminate on the function of the desk as a site of cultural production. Iteration, however, remains a key idea. In it, Long writes that, 'The desk is both never invented' – since it is a change in nomenclature from table – '& perpetually invented' (Long 2010b: 2). This notion of perpetual reinvention and the critique-stable meaning it implies takes shape not only in the multiple iterations of Long's desk-sculptures, but also in the series of collaborations, workshops and publications that emanate from his deceptively simple question. It is perhaps most clearly visible in the peculiar form taken by the periodical: all contributions are republished in subsequent volumes with new additions interspersed throughout. Just as the desk is perpetually invented, so too will the question of its invention find perpetually changing answers as each existing statement is recontextualized by that which comes after it. In his preface to *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Long quotes Flaubert as writing that, 'Ineptitude consists in wanting to conclude.

Yes, stupidity consists in wanting to conclude' (Long 2010a: 12). If, by inhabiting the role of the copyists while producing *The Illustrated Dictionary of Received Ideas*, Long purposefully embraced the idiocy Flaubert found so maddening and so fascinating, here he resolutely refuses it by ensuring that his text – though in a manner altogether different from that of Flaubert's unfinished novel – will never find a true end.

In the first volume (2010), Long interweaves his text with a piece by Liam Gillick concerning the differences between anti-Taylorist and neo-Taylorist organizations of labour. The recto of a given page identifies the author of each paragraph that will appear on the verso, making the text less an enactment of Foucault's 'anonymous murmur' and more a cacophonous confrontation of two strikingly different voices deployed as parallel monologues. Long's tone moves from the anecdotal to the speculative and back again, while Gillick's adopts a contemporary theory-speak familiar from the artist's other writings, nowhere addressing the specific issue of the desk but raising the question of how work around it might be organized. In the work's second volume (also 2010), these initial contributions are reprinted and joined by a response from Mike Gallagher, the publication's designer. Gallagher complicates the separateness of the two voices of the first volume by directly addressing them both. To Long's proposal that the desk is primarily a site of cultural production, for example, Gallagher responds, '"Cultural" is not the only kind of production to take place at a desk' (Long 2010c: 3), thereby raising the spectre of desks other than Long's own, like those Bouvard and Pécuchet might have occupied before decamping to the country, or those occupied by students, secretaries or bankers. To Gillick's discussion of the form of teamwork proper to the anti-Taylorist and neo-Taylorist organization of labour, Gallagher offers the anti-Taylorist example of how 1990s advertising and consultancy firms left behind individual desks and instead embraced open-concept workspaces meant to inspire energetic collaboration.

With plans to continue this cumulative braiding together of disparate voices in future editions of the work, Long insists on maintaining the text's status as an open-ended and ceaselessly transforming document of the interactions and collaborations that inform his practice. In this sense, the periodical *Who Invented The Desk?* is not simply a publication but also a network of relations made manifest. Public conversations and workshops at Front Desk Apparatus in New York City and at the Wysing Arts Centre's 'Art and Writing' retreat, serve both as extensions of the project and also as a means of generating material for inclusion in upcoming volumes. Rather than the strict division between artist-as-producer and public-as-consumer that generally holds sway, here these terms are opened to renegotiation, as the project's public in one instance might transform into its co-creator in the next.

This rendering visible of the often hidden networks of communication that underlie cultural production is also central to one of the text's principle propositions: that the desk serves as a metonym that signals a shift in the dominant conception of artistic labour. A materials-based creativity has today given way to the far less romantic conception of the artist as engaged in a quasi-bureaucratic form of dematerialized intellectual production – in Long's words, the '*artiste*' becomes the 'administrator' (Long 2010b: 10). Concomitant with this reformulation of the artist's role is the move away from the myth of solitary genius to an acknowledgement of the manner in which the artist is imbricated in networks social, informational and financial. In a move that one might trace back to 1960s conceptualism, the desk – as a site of encounter

and correspondence – rather than the studio, becomes the primary location of cultural production. Long does not build the *Invented Desk for Copying* by hand, but subcontracts the labour and then serves as a liaison between the fabricator and the institution that will be exhibiting the finished desk. As noted above, this is far from anomalous within the art world. However, it is urgent to think through how artists today have inherited the 1960s impulse to remove all traces of the artist's hand from the work of art. What began as an important intervention that sought to problematize a mythologized conception of artistic creativity at the time exemplified by abstract expressionism – the last stand of Long's *artiste* – has today become a dominant mode of production that has too often eluded interrogation. Mirroring the valorization of immaterial over manual labour that marks our society more generally, a single name is deemed the author of something produced by many and collective labour masquerades as individual agency. Everyone knows about the vast studios of Eliasson and Murakami, but how frequently assessed is the prevalence of creative outsourcing and its political implications in the work of artists operating at a considerably more modest scale? The 1960s imperative to critique standing models of artistic authorship remains valid in our time; it is simply that what constitutes the standing model today has changed. By posing the question of the kind of work that takes place at his desk, and by welcoming responses to it from a wide variety of individuals occupying diverse roles across the cultural sector, many of whom are his close collaborators, Long takes a first step in opening up a discussion around this crucially under-examined issue. As only two fairly brief iterations of the periodical have been released thus far, the question of how successfully the publication will grapple with the very difficult set of issues it has raised remains open, to be answered by future volumes.

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