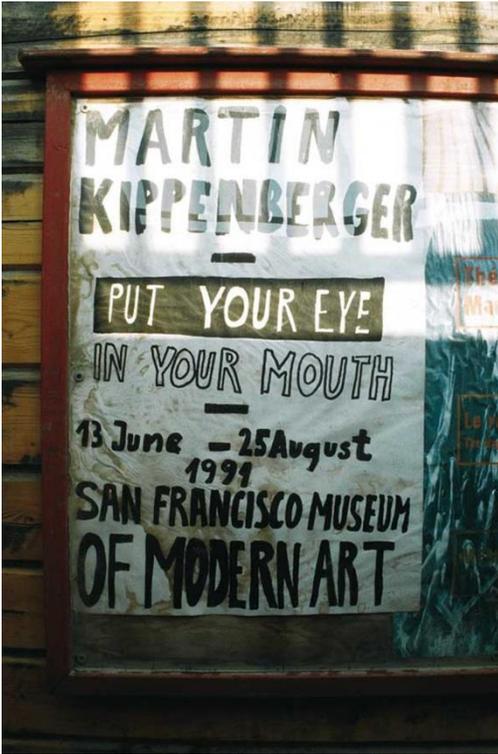


Mousse Magazine

Taylor Made. Zin Taylor and the Story of Form

by Dieter Roelstraete

The art world is flooded with printed matter, a bottomless hunger for paper that Dieter Roelstraete finds an opportunity to analyze in relation to the work of Zin Taylor, undoubtedly an exquisite narrator. His stories often focus on anecdotes from art history and are patiently excavated, “unearthed”, even literally entering the underground realm...



Why are so many young artists interested in storytelling? Why am I, when visiting the art schools of the world, so often asked, in this day and age, to read or listen to work rather than merely look at it? And this, typically, in studios that are cluttered with books and photocopied texts first and foremost, old school art “objects” often a distant second? Why are so many artists writing, and interested in writing? Why etc.—many more questions much like the above could be asked still, and perhaps they shouldn’t. After all, artists may well constitute the last truly dependable consumer constituency for that exact type of specialty writing or publishing which the undersigned, among many others, engages in. Indeed, while the mainstream press (that is to say, by and large, the printed word) is continually awash in apocalyptic tidings about the end of print—and they are probably right too—the art world appears consumed, paradoxically (or not), by an unquenchable thirst for printed matter, and the subject of this essay, Brussels-based Canadian artist Zin Taylor, is not notably different in this regard, as the ever-expanding catalogue of Zin Taylor-made artist books seems to attest.

Now anyone who raises the kind of questions like those raised above, must also, even if only rhetorically, attempt an answer of some kind, and my suggestion for such an answer would probably involve the following elements: 1) the increased demand for literacy (both “literary” and theoretical) that has become an essential ingredient of art education; 2) the distinct aura of anachronism and obsolescence that is starting to surround the art of book-making; 3) the artist’s typical instinct to come to the rescue of precisely those cultural phenomena that are becoming increasingly marginalized and threatened with disappearance. Somewhat related to this impulse is the intertwined issue of 4) the hypertrophy of image production in our current cultural climate—which has led to a devaluation of the image that the

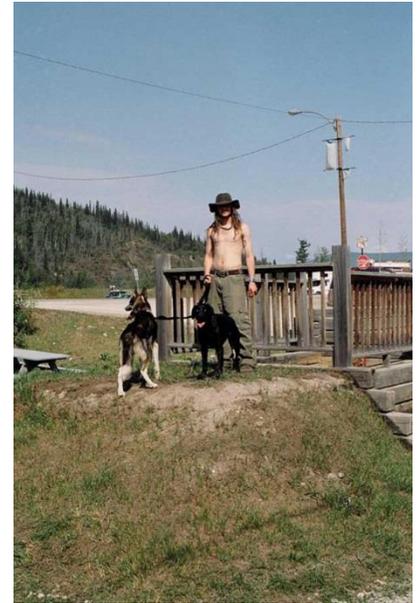
artist, historically attached to a tradition of “good” images, does not want to be a part of (“the piece need not be built”, in Lawrence Weiner’s famous formulation)—and 5) the specter of cultural amnesia that hovers above this hypertrophic cult of the ever-accelerating, -expanding and -proliferating image world. The forgetting of language that is implied in this vertiginous regime of ocular overload (the more we see, the less we speak; the more we see, the less we remember) is also, inevitably, a forgetting of history, and a forgetting of the many stories that constitute the patchwork of history. Hence (perhaps): storytelling in art.

Zin Taylor certainly is a storyteller, and the narrative impulse (not a mere “turn”, this time) is a driving force behind much of his work; many of his artistic projects either involve extensive narration, often told in the artist’s own voice, or the publication of these narratives in book form. In a number of cases, these stories have touched upon certain minutiae of recent art history—this does not, however, make Taylor into your typical “referentiality” artist, nor is he overly concerned with the politics of re-enactment—such as Martin Kippenberger’s abandoned metro station in the Yukon or Marcel Broodthaers’ eagle fixation. In *Put Your Eye In Your Mouth: A Conversational Documentary Recording Martin Kippenberger’s Metro-Net Station in Dawson City, Yukon* (the literary character of Taylor’s work is also apparent in his love of elaborate titles: it is hard to imagine any of his works being named Untitled), a work in part inspired by the artist’s conversations with the man who paid for and built the eponymous metro station, Taylor set out to uncover what little remains of the Northern Canadian site of Kippenberger’s worldwide metro network. The resulting video (and accompanying publication, simply titled *Nook*) is as much an irreverent, quick-fingered fiction as an On the Road-style documentary—an obfuscation befitting the notoriously megalomaniacal subject of this homage. Made in 2008, just after Taylor moved to Belgium to take up permanent residence there, *The Crystal Ship* is a video/publication diptych much like the previous work, “a journalistic narrative that approaches the visual working practice of Marcel Broodthaers as a contextual frame to interpret a series of landmarks within an Antwerp neighborhood”, as the artist has put it. The work also involves a set of small, unassuming clay sculptures, one depicting an eagle (Broodthaers’ totem animal, of course, this one modeled on an actual statue in Antwerp’s museum quarter), another a scale model of the façade of the house in Antwerp that was once home to the legendary gallery A379089 (directed, for six months of its all too short-lived existence, by none other than

Susan Hobbs Gallery

Kasper König), in the garden of which Broodthaers recorded his famous writing-degree-zero performance *La Pluie* (1969)—this garden in turn becoming the site where Taylor would present, performance-like, the various findings of his idiosyncratic research into this (naturally unknown) subterranean local art history.

The speleological metaphor of the artist patiently, if a little manically, burrowing to uncover and unearth truly underground (art) histories is not innocently chosen here, and nowhere has Taylor's interest in a literalized practice of excavation been expressed more clearly as in *The Flute of Sub*, an ensemble of works—true to the D.I.Y. total-work-of-art spirit of Kippenberger and the like, Taylor also designs posters or series of posters to accompany his videos—the central sculptural element of which is a flute made out of plastic and whose irregular, crooked form is modeled after the shape of one nexus in a subterranean system of tunnels the artist happened upon while sojourning in the Scottish Highlands (this piece was included in an exhibition I curated at the Ursula Blickle Stiftung in 2009 titled *The Archaeologists*, for which Taylor also designed the poster). The video, which really functions as an allegorical reflection upon the inscrutable mysteries of “form”, recounts the artist's discovery of these mysterious man-made tunnels, while every screening of it has been introduced in the past by an actual flute recital—performed by Taylor himself, needless to say, the flute's material and shape being such that it cannot be played by the uninitiated. As such, the work also exemplifies Taylor's strong reliance on musical culture, often the more obscure (“underground”) the better—“psych folk” in *The Flute of Sub*, droning “witch folk” in *White Pearl Sunshine Summoning Charm* (2007), eccentric Jap noise in *The Allegorical Function of Dirt: A Discussion with Aki Tsuyuko's Ongakushitsu* (2005), and abstract grindcore in *The Locust* (2004).



If *The Flute of Sub* essentially revolved around the inscrutable mysteries of “form” while still appearing to be something other, then the question of growth, of the organic, only mildly artist-assisted development of form, has recently come to occupy center stage in Taylor's work in a much more direct, bare-bones fashion, and works such as *The Bakery of Blok* and the appositely titled *Organisms* (a series of color photographs of kneaded bits of dough) and *Growth on a Form* (a series of drawings of “imagined wood forms that have become overrun with an ooze-like material”) signal a definite shift towards a fundamental interrogation of sculpture's basic language, if not of the very assumptions that underlie the enterprise of sculpture and art as such. How do forms come about? Do materials have a will of their own, content to speak through Zin Taylor's hands as long as he's able to give voice to matter's inner thought? In *The Bakery of Blok* (which again consists of a video as well as a series of wooden sculptures, crude replicas of the tools of the baking trade), the art of baking bread is held up as an idiomatic metaphor for the art of giving sensuous shape to thinking—the art of art, in short. Here, we are returning to an origin of sorts—heading for the fundamentals. Indeed, carpentry and the multiplication of breads: where have we heard that story before?

Originally published on *Mousse 27* (February-March 2011)