

...THE WING SPAN OF AN OWL, ENABLING FLIGHT... (RUMINATION ON THE LIVES OF TWO BIRDS AND A MAN)

BY YAM LAU

AN OWL AND ITS WINGS: CUSTOM MEASURING FORMS OF LIFE

The first line of this title cites from a previous text I wrote on Brian's work. It alludes, without elaboration, to an early work of his entitled, *Wing Span of a Large Owl* (1991). At the time, I left the reference as just that, in order to protect its mystery. And yet, this early work contains the living seed of a consistent practice.

Wing Span of a Large Owl is an elongated, cylindrical metal structure that rests horizontally on the floor. Formally, it resembles a type of precision measuring instrument—a special kind of ruler perhaps. If it is so, the sole purpose of this device is to call into view the exact dimension that enables the "large owl" (and not anything else) to take flight, and by corollary, to live as an owl.



Wing Span of a Large Owl, 1991

When the artwork is limited to measuring one "thing," it in fact entails a kind of exactness that is radically different from those procured through standardized conventions such as the Metric or the English system. However practical and useful those conventions may be, they remain independent and indifferent to the "life" and "character" of their subjects. To this effect, the difference between the majesty of the Great Wall of China and the tenderness of the finger of a small child would only be rendered in numbers, while their qualitative difference in character would remain unregistered. Contrary to this way of describing and measuring the world, which can be labeled as objective and instrumental, Brian's practice demonstrates that there is

an alternate, poetic kind of exactitude that articulates and measures the life and character of its subject precisely and exclusively.

Unlike the standard conventions, this kind of exactness is not independent of or instituted prior to its subject's process. For example, in the case of the owl's wing span, the length is not realized until the complicated unfolding of evolution determines what the owl needs to take flight. *The Wing Span of a Large Owl* coincides perfectly with this trajectory of the evolutionary process that engineered the form of life called the owl. Hence, one may conclude that *The Wing Span of a Large Owl* performs an exercise in "custom the sum total of one particular evolutionary process that finds its expression in the style of existence that is the owl".

Could the phrase "exercise in custom measure" benefit Brian's work in general and thereby underscore the continuity between his early and the most recent work? Perhaps... I am inclined to postulate Brian's operative principle as custom articulation of life's manifold mystery through the invention of poetic measures.

A BIRD AND ITS CAGE: A PERFORMATIVE DWELLING

One of my companions is a Singing Finch named Dirk. Living up to the trait of his particular breed, Dirk proves to be a lovely, excellent, yet relentless singer. From his round, delicate bamboo cage the little bird sings all day long without respite. His resolute incessancy led me to imagine that singing ought to be his style of being. I am almost certain that Dirk sings for the world, his songs resonate far beyond the confine of his cage.



All that Exists, 2011

About a decade ago, I invited a number of artists to create work in situ for my apartment. Responding to this invitation, Brian realized *All that Exists* (2001), an "architectural" intervention to Dirk's habitat. This modest work comprises two elements: a three-and-a-half inch wide canvas band that wraps around the circumference of Dirk's cage, and two identical infinity symbols printed on both the inside and the outside surface of the band. Here, as in a number of other works, the choice to intervene at the parameter of a space indicates the artist's predilection to engage with the transformative ambiguity of thresholds¹.

While the canvas band of *All that Exists* conforms and acknowledges the physical limitation of the cage, the work also releases itself from this conformity through the inscription of the infinity symbols. The uniqueness of the symbol is such that it has both mathematical and poetical connotations. It signals an extension that exceeds any determined, objectified totality. Formally, the looping circularity of the infinity symbol echoes the roundness of the cage. When the two symbols are straightened, their combined length would be precisely identical to the actual circumference of the cage. This equation between the virtual/abstract symbol and the actual/physical parameter of the cage enacts a trope that conflates a number of generally incommensurable registers: the infinite with the finite, the immeasurable with the measurable, the poetical with the literal. This conflation, strategically enacted at the architectural threshold of the birdcage implicates and situates the one register in its opposite other.

What does this conflation do? I regard *All that Exists* as a transformative injunction. It states, at the critical threshold of the cage, that the cage is not merely a neutral and determined volume, but an expressive and performative territory animated by its occupant Dirk, whose songs inaugurate a poetic dimension that intimates the infinite. The French composer Olivier Messiaen, known for his transcriptions of bird songs into musical compositions remarked that birds are "little messengers of infinite joy" and "avatars of Angels." I conclude that the cumulative effect of *All that Exists* elevates the physical limit of the cage as a ceremonial threshold. It enacts a crossing over from the finite to infinite as initiated by Dirk's singing, which is his style of living.

A MAN AND HIS LIFE IN MUSIC: DIFFERENTIAL OF PERFECTION

While the title $40^{\circ}44'34''N, 73^{\circ}58'42''W$ (2005) indicates a geographic coordinate, the work itself, a simple white, horizontal plaque announces a duration—twelve minutes and forty eight seconds to be exact. These matter-of-fact markers of specific place and time beg the question of what they are presenting to the viewer.

By itself the stated duration is arbitrary, even meaningless. Yet, when paired with the geographical coordinates of the title, both elements outline a particular spatial temporal matrix. Twelve minutes and forty eight second measures the temporal differential between Glenn Gould's two recordings of Bach's Goldberg Variations that are made almost thirty years apart (the first one in 1955 launched Gould's international career, the second one in 1981 was recorded just prior to his death), while the coordinates in the title locate the studio where the recordings were made.

Definitively, Gould's seminal recordings reinvented the Goldberg Variations twice within the span of a single lifetime. For me (and I am sure for many others too), the name Glenn Gould and the Goldberg Variations are inextricably entwined, almost synonymous. I remember vividly my first listening of Gould's performance of them. I was eighteen years old, stranded at the airport and distressed due to being denied entry to the United States to see my girlfriend at the time. I had no "plan b" and nowhere to go. It just so happened that my friend had prepared a piece of music for



40°44'34"N, 73°58'42"W, 2005

my trip. With nothing else to do, I played it through my portable player. I remember being instantly transported out of my misery by the music. Everything was left behind. Later, I learned the music was Gould's second recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations.

Today I am familiar with both recordings. The remarkable difference in duration renders the two recordings as two unique instances of "perfection" that are actualized from a common source. This difference is most apparent from the opening Aria in the 1981 version, which is delivered in a much slower tempo than the 1955 recording. Bracketing Gould's life as a pianist, the recordings underscore a life lived and transformed in music. All of this is inexplicable and beautiful.

It is perhaps inadequate to think of Gould and the Goldberg as two distinct entities. Rather, their mutually appropriating relation welds a singular transforming identity. Transforming entails differing. Perhaps life simply differs, and that difference is less about the variance between "entities" (Gould and the Goldberg) than the manner in which entities are explicated out of life's mobility. 12 minutes and 48 seconds presents a precise measurement to attend to this essential differing, out of which a man's life and musical composition were shaped and fused.

LAST WORDS: TRUST IN THE WORLD

Regardless of the efficacy of my interpretation, its relevance is only warranted by that which eludes writing. After all "meaning," according to Brian, is probably overrated. I undertake this writing exercise because I admire Brian's character and his work. They

share a quality of quiet presence and humility. His work demonstrates a nuanced sensitivity that enlarges and vitalizes life. The poetical and the literal are entangled to articulate selected instances of life that warrant attention, respect and wonder. Every work is realized with the most economical of means and consideration in craft. Imagination is exercised with restraint. The works evince a refined composure that warrants their presence a believable reality. There is a palpable sense of purpose and goodness in this exemplary endeavor.

Notes:

^[1] The other works I can think of are *Untitled* (2002), *50°06'0"N, 14°15'0"E* (2005)

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YAM LAU was born in Hong Kong. He received his MFA from the University of Alberta, and is now based in Toronto, where he is an associate professor of painting at York University. His most recent works combine video and computer-generated animation. Lau also publishes regularly on art and design and has exhibited his work widely in Canada, USA, Europe and China. He is a co-founder of the community based art project "Donkey Institute of Contemporary Art" in Beijing, China.

BRIAN GROOMBRIDGE has been exhibiting since 1978, his first solo show being at YYZ in 1979. Groombridge attended both Sheridan College (1972) and the Ontario College of Art where he participated in the O.C.A. NY Off-Campus Study Program (1977). A selection of his recent exhibitions include, *Like-Minded*, Plug In ICA, Winnipeg (2012), *Model (interior) of Piet Munson House, Utrecht, 1922-24*, Convenience Gallery, Toronto (2010), Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto (2008), *Me and Them*, Kenderdine Art Gallery, Saskatoon (2007), and *The Cold City Years*, The Power Plant, Toronto (2005). Groombridge is represented by Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.