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François Piron & Joe Scanlan

**COMMODIFY YOUR DISSENT : A CONVERSATION WITH JOE
SCANLAN**

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François Piron: One of the points that remains a bit dark for me is the status of your works. If I understand well, you seem to demand a degree of "invention" in your works, claiming their usefulness and practicality, like a designer. It seems for instance to be the case with the cosmetic tear-shaped ornaments you sold in 1999, and with the *Nesting Bookcases*¹ (1989-1995).

Joe Scanlan: I do require an element of invention in my work, but it is not so much because I find inventions useful or practical, but because inventions usually originate at some low, private level. This gives them traits - eccentricity, optimism, delusions of grandeur - that are not often found in socially engineered objects. Collaboration, or creation by a random group of people in a room, requires compromises that prevent stranger, more unlikely responses from taking place. So, it is invention's point of origin that I find most appealing. Usefulness and practicality enter into it only if an invention desires to grow and circulate and be accepted by others. A stranger will not care for the charming eccentricity of my idea, not unless they are content merely to contemplate it as a proposition, as a work of art. If they desire any greater interaction than that, then they will want my invention to have merit. That's where use value comes in.

For example, *Catalyst* in 1999 was the brand name of the cosmetic tear. This was a small offset-printed packet that contained six acrylic tears--2 small, 2 medium and 2 large. As a sculpture it measured only 70 x 30 x 5 mm, but it was a sculpture that could be carried in your pocket or purse. Better yet, it was a set of six sculptures that could be worn on the face and used as a tool for shaping public opinion. Wear one on the metro, and maybe someone would give you their seat. Wear one during the Iraqi

¹ The Nesting Bookcase is composed of four shelves of different sizes, held together by a cord that runs through a hole in the middle of each shelf. A Nesting Bookcase can be shown nested or braced, against a wall or freestanding, in an open interpretation regarding the modes of display.

War as a symbol of protest. Or wear one to a party, just for laughs. I still hear from people who have this sculpture and have enjoyed it for years.

FP: Is it a theoretical will to extend the limits of the art object (following some of the early vanguard ideas of Bauhaus and De Stijl) or do you want to go out of the art world and let your works be considered as something different from art objects ?

JS: Yes, I have desires similar to those of the Bauhaus and De Stijl and Constructivism. I have never been interested in being a scientist for the leisure class, which is what most artists have been since Manet: individuals who have a kind of "pure" pursuit that doubles as a conversation piece for a very small group of people. I want art to live a more interesting life than that. But if it's going to do that now - especially in relation to cinema and music and design - it is going to have to come up with different ways to be seen and consumed. For me, that means having to become more democratic, more widely distributed. I don't mind my objects being in the art world, and, in fact, I cannot force them to leave it. The only way they can accomplish any kind of expansion or democracy is if they are so appealing, and have so much potential for other people, that they get dragged out of the artworld and into the street. That's what happens to any good idea, whether it starts out as art or not. A good idea can generate massive amounts of enthusiasm and desire and venture capital. That's what I'm after, but not necessarily in that order.

FP: If I hear you well, you seem to have a precise point of view about the destiny of good ideas and especially about the notion of copyright. You certainly know what happened when Bridget Riley for example attacked the MoMa in 1964 because the museum staff was dressed in Bridget Riley-style striped clothes². Or when Gillian Wearing started proceedings against Saatchi because she found some of "her" ideas in an advertisement. I don't know if she was conscious that "her" idea of people holding their thoughts on written signs was something she found in the street, and even already there in culture, if we think about Bob Dylan in the film *Don't Look Back* by D.A. Pennebaker in 1965. All this deals with the idea of circulation of signs, of ideas, of quotations (a quotation is a quotation is a quotation, could we say), and now it seems very difficult for an individual to claim property of anything. How do you feel with that? Do you think your work tries to deal with these things?

JS: It's an excellent question. First of all, I wouldn't necessarily say that only good ideas have a destiny. I think all ideas have potential, but it is their reception that defines them and allows them be circulated and adapted and used. It would be difficult to say that an AK-47³ is a good idea, even though it has become a very successful and popular item. 70 million people can't be wrong, can they? I didn't know the Bridget Riley story, but I remember the Gillian Wearing one. Both artists are very naive about what intellectual property is or how it is defined in legal terms. Their actions are no less pretentious than those of artists who insist that images and

² More details in Karsten Schubert, *Dear Images: Art, Copyright and Culture*, Ridinghouse-ICA, London, 2002

³ Joe Scanlan dedicated a text to this russian assault rifle: "Picture: AK-47", in *Frieze*, January-February 1998, p.35.

property should be free and open and exchangeable. This is also a very naive notion, a utopian notion, a hippie notion. So I disagree with you about the difficulty of claiming property. It is easy to say that everything has been done, that everything comes from things that precede it--a quote of a quote of a quote, as you say. Yes, it's mostly true--but it's also slightly not true, and this small, "slightly not true" part that interests me, because even though everything has supposedly already been said and done, once in a while someone comes along who speaks or acts in a way that no one has ever known before. And even though this person, this genius, is using the same language or the same physical laws as everyone else, they use those same predetermined elements in a new way. And this is power. Artists have very little power. In America, a ruthlessly money-based and moralistic country, persons who make things that are of no obvious or immediate value are viewed as charlatans at best and, at worst, parasites. Now, if my best chance of survival, my best chance of leveraging any money or power or influence in such a culture as the United States stems directly from my ability to invent and exploit images that no one has ever seen before--and that only I can come up with--why would I want to push for an open, "share ware" kind of value system where my last vestigial hope for self-sufficiency would get poured in the street? Why give away one of the few remaining powers I have as an artist, which is the ability to generate and control unique images? Isn't it possible that artists who believe in the death of the author really just don't have any ideas? That's the only rationale I can think of for championing a social philosophy that would make ideas freely exchangeable, without restricting or copyright.

FP: I would be interested in hearing from you more about the idea of self-sufficiency. Some of your works seem very related to this notion, like *The Potting Soil* or *Dirty*. Could you give me additional information about these series of works, in relation with self-sufficiency, a concept I can easily understand as an economical strategy but that remains politically ambiguous, as a retreat from society and the idea of the exchangeability of signs.

JS: I don't see self-sufficiency and the exchangeability of signs as being mutually exclusive. When I say self-sufficiency I don't mean total isolation, like Henry David Thoreau or Robinson Crusoe, because that kind of existence is impossible. Crusoe had the wreckage of his ship to live on--a great metaphor for the remnants of society--and Thoreau had his family fortune to fall back on if his little experiment out in the woods didn't work out. It is impossible to not be part of the world, so the question I ask myself is: how do I want to participate? What kind of power do I want to have and how do I want my actions to affect others?

I have ideas to offer other people, and I am happy to exchange them for what I need to continue living and generating them. When I am not offering my own products for exchange, I am purchasing the products of others that appeal to me. If all of the people in this network are participating in a similar way, it creates a very diverse--but somewhat inefficient--system of exchange, because there is no overarching authority controlling production to make it more efficient and profitable. That would jeopardize not only the autonomy of each person in the society but also the diversity of their ideas, their views of the world and what they want to offer it. Thorstein

Veblen, the American political economist who wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, likens this kind of exchange system to a hypothetical small town. In his town, there is one of everything: one banker, one grocer, one butcher, one shoemaker, etc. In such an arrangement, direct competition is replaced by the necessity of carving out an occupation that does not overlap with anyone else's, so as to guarantee one's own survival and the necessity of what that person has to offer. In such an arrangement, prices tend to be higher than they would be in a more competitive and efficient one, but because everyone's prices are higher everyone has that much more money to spend on everyone else's goods.

I have two opinions on Veblen's model. The first is that artists should be an equal and integral part of this system of exchange, no more or less special than the butcher or the person who crochets toilet covers.

My second take is that, in our time, his "small town" has become the whole world. With that expansion has come all kinds of forces--most obviously the United States--trying to consolidate and homogenize cultural production for their own benefit. A key component of homogenization is the need to have as much of the world and its property "up for grabs" as possible, so that whatever is in play can be seized and transformed to the dominant power's liking. Iraq for example. If all creative property was "free" for the taking in this way, then, eventually, all songs, images, poems, objects, filmscripts etc. would come into the control of the dominant power and be remade in their image. Dissent would be useless, for even dissent would get swept up and sterilized before re-entering such system of free exchange. Intellectual property, private property, is essential to a diverse society because it protects every individual's right to dissent. Not only their right to original dissent, as in free speech, but also their right to protect and sustain their dissent as private property over a long period of time. If individuals have the exclusive right to commodify and exploit their dissent, then they can profit from it and use those profits to generate more dissent, and the target of the dissent can do nothing about it, short of breaking the law. In my mind, this is a much better strategy for critique and empowerment than appropriation strategy, because, no matter how critical or aggressive appropriation might be, it can never escape the confines of what it appropriates, that being the interests of the dominant culture. By contrast, a system of strict intellectual property allows relatively small and powerless people to generate quite large and powerful images that are their own exclusive domain, embedded in but distinct from the dominant culture. This is especially true in a digital culture, where one dissenter with a computer can have a huge creative impact.

FP: Could you tell me more about the consequences of this position on your own practice and production? Michael Newman in his essay⁴ writes that your work tends to disappear into a fake "generic" aspect. What are the elements holding back your work from the disappearance? Is it a question of style, as emphasized for example by Heimo Zobernig in this sentence: "Style is an existential necessity, the one and unique remaining necessity. What I mean is to be recognized, being able to be

⁴ Michael Newman, "After Conceptual Art: Joe Scanlan's Nesting Bookcases, Duchamp, Design and the Impossibility of Disappearing", in Michael Newman and Jon Bird (ed.), *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Reaktion Books, Critical Views series, London, 1999.

identified. Repetition and redundancy allow me to be understandable, to possess a language. We need to establish our own idiom. Sometimes authors need to exert pressure on viewers to transmit their point of view."⁵

JS: Yes, it is a question of style. The word I would use is distinction, which is an aspect, or a goal, of style, since style is as much a question of how to do something as it is what something looks like. To be distinct is to do what everyone else is doing, generally, but to do it in a way that is not quite the same as everyone else and so draws attention to you, distinguishes you, even if that is not your meaning. So I agree with Heimo and think that we are saying the same thing, only he puts the emphasis on what we share with everyone else, and I put the emphasis on how we make that common language our own.

Heimo is certainly in the majority. 99 percent of what we do comes from others, and 1 percent we invent on our own. Probably not even that much--its more like .1 or .01 percent.

This sliver of originality is the basis of my *Pay Dirt* product and manifesto. Although the packaging for *Pay Dirt* is very persuasive--an attractive, 6-liter polyethylene bag with three-color, flexible-ink graphics--the product itself is quite inert and unspectacular to the naked eye. It is dirt, like and unlike every other kind of dirt, whether commercially or naturally formed. Nonetheless, *Pay Dirt* is unique to me and therefore useful as a kind of soapbox on which to stand and proclaim my proud participation in--but distinction within--the global economy. I'm very proud of this dirt and I enjoy making it. It is a vital, healthy product that promotes nourishment and beauty wherever it goes. So, as both a product and a philosophy, I want *Pay Dirt* to be infectious. I want it to get under people's fingernails.

FP: You certainly know this french sociologist from the 1970's, Michel de Certeau, who stressed the idea of invention in the everyday life, of "users'" (as he says) crafty tactics among the orders and conditionings of the society. These ideas were a real riposte in the context of Debord's *The Society of Spectacle*, which dramatized the global and constant alienation of the spectacle, and perhaps were a metaphor for the contemporary artistic practices: the user becoming producer. I read many texts arguing that your creations are very related to your own needs, i.e. in the context of your private space, and you seem to be interested in what people do with your works in their own private space, in terms of appropriations and uses. Between these private areas, art continues to deal with a public space especially dedicated to it, but at the same time decontextualising it from these singular origins and destinations. This place is the museum. How do you pay attention to it?

JS: Yes, I know de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* very well, which I first read fourteen years ago and which made a great impression on me. At the time, the art world in the United States was all Debord and Baudrillard, all Jenny Holzer and Heim Steinbach and Jeff Koons. I was amused by these artists, and liked their aggressive switching of contexts and values, but I thought their works were

⁵ "Ce que vous voyez est une exposition", interview between Heimo Zobernig and Daniel Baumann, in *Oublier l'exposition*, Art Press HS n°21, Paris, 2000.

politically flawed. The most glaring flaw was that the more they challenged the conventional value system of art, the more they needed that value system to protect their own interests, which turned out to be not to challenge conventional art at all but merely to be the newest members of the club. Once their work entered the museum and became fixed as art, there was no desire for it to come unfixed again. I think de Certeau is very refreshing in contrast to this inevitable "taming" of art. He insists that in order for people and their ideas to stay alive they must remain flexible, disguised, unspectacular.

If I make a museum show, then I emphasize the temporary status of my work being there. I want viewers to know that it is passing through, that the museum is one of many possible places for my work to land, and that no one place is more important than any other. Museum, home, boutique, warehouse, trash bin--my work is fine in any of these contexts, and I have to trust that, wherever it ends up, that is where it deserves to be.

The only control I have is in making the original object as compelling and desirable as possible. After that, it can become fixed or unfixed however its users see fit. This is a continually evolving process, one in which museums play a role, but not THE role.

I made a photo work several years ago on the consequences of this approach. It was a series of photographs documenting the temporary resting place of 29 *Nesting Bookcases*. It was titled "An Investigation on the Role of the Consumer in the Interpretation of a Work of Art," and showed the *Nesting Bookcases* in all kinds of formal and informal postures, used and not used, integrated in people's lives and buried in their storerooms. It was made by soliciting everyone I knew who had a *Nesting Bookcase* to send me a snapshot of it, wherever it may be. I gave no instructions, and trusted human nature to determine whether people would be candid or would alter their *Nesting Bookcase* on my behalf. I betrayed no preference; either approach would entail a mixture of fiction and truth. The results were very concrete, an almost archeological demonstration of what happens when a sign like the *Nesting Bookcase*, which has been formed as strictly and specifically as possible, enters the public realm and gets twisted, exalted, buried, veiled. Like that 1960s pop song:

bend me, shape me, anyway you want me, you've got the power, and that's alright.

Post-scriptum

FP: J'étais en train de relire notre conversation avant l'impression de la revue, et je réalise que vous avez réussi sympathiquement à m'entraîner sur votre terrain de prédilection, à savoir les considérations économiques qui irriguent votre travail. Et j'ai complètement oublié en chemin un des objectifs de cet entretien, qui était pour moi de vous faire parler du "sujet" de votre œuvre, sur lequel vous vous exprimez peu, en privilégiant le processus sur le contenu. Or il y a une préoccupation récurrente, qui concerne la mort, dans nombre de vos pièces, notamment ce livre où vous vous êtes servi du personnage d'Ann Lee, créé par Huyghe et Parreno, comme démonstratrice pour la fabrication d'un cercueil à partir de mobilier IKEA. Même la

fabrication de poussière ou les larmes synthétiques sont empreintes d'une certaine mélancolie.

JS: At the most basic level, I would say that I have always been attracted to things that are bittersweet, or melancholy, or having to do with death. I was born that way. I grew up in rural Ohio, and the landscape and the weather were the first places where I saw reassuring reflections of myself, or what I felt myself to be. I was just chemically attracted to dying cornstalks, November days, winter light, snow falling, thunderstorms.

Making art is a way for me to create this mood whenever I want, like an addict who makes his own drugs simply for the pleasure of using them; the making of the drug and the anticipation of its effect is as pleasing as "taking" it. This is certainly true with the fake forsythia and the artificial tears. Knowing that is what I want, and that it can be planned and manufactured in advance, and yet still have the same effect on me--even though I know it's coming--is very reassuring. It's power. I like having the impression, or illusion, whatever we want to call it, that how I feel and when I feel it is still up to me. That's why I make art, basically, to make myself feel the way I want to feel rather than how all the powers that be in the world want me to feel. I think that's the rationale for anyone who drinks or takes drugs or climbs rocks or knits sweaters or makes charcoal drawings of the universe.

Death is just the ultimate form of that power, the thing that every drug user and rock climber flirts with everytime when they engage in their addiction and try to push it to the next level of intensity and joy. But where drug use or rock climbing are glamorous examples of people choosing to approach death, my approach is much more boring and mundane.

I made my first coffin in 1997 as a challenge to myself to see if I had the patience to commit myself--sacrifice myself--to the amount of work and care required for making this very complicated box. It was an exercise, a rite of passage. Tremendously boring and detail oriented, and all for an object that would end up six feet under ground. But of course it didn't--a museum bought it and "rescued" it forever.

That's where my content can take on political ramifications. Death is power and it is also certainty, at least in terms of knowing that something has disappeared. The idea of art or the artist disappearing has been an interest of mine for some time. And I have noticed that the more artists try to annihilate themselves or their work, the more the art world rescues them.. It's an endless game that only a few have managed to escape. Bas Jan Ader for example.

Anyway, I thought making that first coffin would resolve things. Instead it only complicated them and gave birth to a drawn out, evolutionary investigation into my own disappearance. I made five more coffins after that, each one requiring less of my presence, or effort, and more of the world's--until the last one, the IKEA/DIY/AnnLee shopping manual, doesn't need me at all. So, what started as an introverted, private enterprise ended

up completely enmeshed with a globally positioned multinational corporation..
And guess what? I'm STILL here!

I like that narrative. It's an apt description of what will happen to us, of what life is like now. It all comes back to chemistry. From the day we are born, our entire life is mapped out in as a predetermined chemical chain of events. methodically impersonating death, faking death, is one way to contradict our destiny, preempt it, make fun of it.

Thanks for your extra care,
Joe