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text + work = work

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text + work

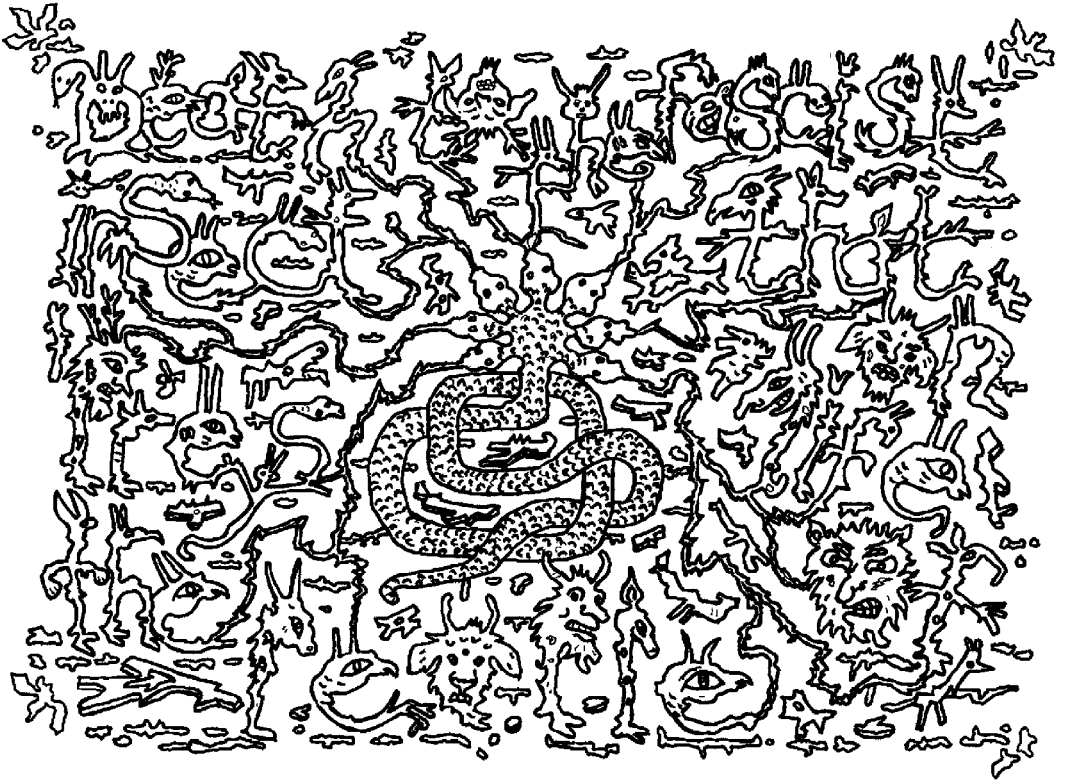




Steve Dutton + Steve Swindells

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The artists have previously described their work as the site where different parts of their worlds have been pulled together to suggest new autonomies. Nevertheless, a continuing inquiry, a foundation of the work, concerns the idea of work itself: that is, in terms of cultural production, what constitutes 'work' and where is that work to be found? On many levels, these are critical questions, not least because they seek to address, amongst other things, the status of work in relation to that which is deemed to be not-work, be it idleness, nothing, leisure or, in this case, text.

For text + work, the central premise of the gallery is taken at face value by focusing on the relationships, interdependencies and divisions between so-called 'text' and so-called 'work'. The similarities and tensions between adjacent 'texts' and 'works' are rendered into one another, merging work, labour and information. The space is a reflection on its own production, its own excess.

The installation for text + work takes the form of a meta-collage, appropriating images, texts and signs, which disturb and play in, and with, a space of cultural production: in this instance the artist's 'studio' (in the broadest sense). The material strategies range from vinyl text works, drawings and prints to photographs and video (animation) which will be site-conditional within the text + work gallery.

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We write in the presence of a potential, as it were, of objects of art placed in a gallery named text + work, with an over-arching remit which concerns the relationship between text and work; or to be more precise the addition of work to text. This presence creates 'hungry' circumstances; any text is under pressure by being traded, collected and ultimately tested as to its performance as a piece of work. Its very performance is under scrutiny from the critically reflective demand of the space and its curator. This compels us to ask something of this division, between that which may be called 'text' and that called 'work'.

Initially imagining that the divisions are propositional, for the sake of a moniker or to suggest the presence of a critically engaged practice, the assumption is that 'text' indicates knowledge and 'work' indicates practice as something other than knowledge: this would make sense considering the location of the gallery within an academic institution and an aura it might seek to create. Yet we also know it is all far more complicated than that. In terms of production, which is the text and which is the work? And where are either really situated?

What is at stake in text + work is how an effective method of work can be developed without resorting to the easy polarisation of text + work as a means of addressing each other from mutually supportive camps.

The issue in this text, then, is not only the content and visual style in which it may be publicly presented, but rather the suggestion that it might collapse into academic observance, protocol and potential closure, and if it does, the proposition that this closure may eliminate its potential as 'work'. After all, is 'work', in terms

of artistic practice at least, not all about the openness of the work itself and the work, the labour, of the reader or viewer in interpretation? If this is so, how is this text maintained as 'work'?

In order to stimulate a presence of work within the text and vice versa, our approach to it is one of (mild) resistance. This resistance is itself made visible with the aid of strategic refusals, one of which is, most crucially, the refusal to exile words from the idea of work - so the text hazards a form of existence as work. We propose then that this 'text' is to be conceived as 'work' in a reciprocal relationship to whatever 'text' is not.

We liken this process to collage, where documentary significance adjacent to the uninformative, decorative or fictive might be melded. In short, the writing is rendered into the context of the processes of work by being placed within the space of 'work', attaching itself to the not so unique aura of the art-work, that is, on this occasion, the gallery itself.

Both text and work may operate in the interstices between reading and looking, involving not just the production of writing, but also graphic or architectural design and a horizon of modalities that may be quite different to a world of cultural theorising. We are already prone to producing unstable inscriptions on the image/text boundary; the incentive being that these uncertainties may lead to quasi-theoretical or quasi-poetic eruptions within the conventions of contemporary cultural production.

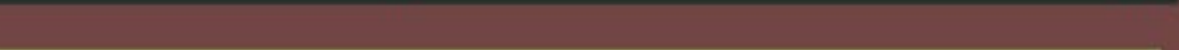
The destination of the text/work is not only unknown at the point of production but, in a get out clause familiar to many frustrated arts administrators, continuously

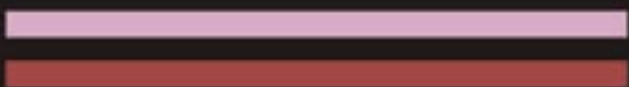
evolving. In its defence, against accusations of clear intent, the resistance to protocol and closure in the production of text plus work reveals strange distances, born out of the process of collage itself. These distances lie in the wake of a resistance to another aspect of work, of forced labour (often pushed to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and her/his progeny), sidling toward a furious passion for the idea of work as a fundamental aspect of being alive.

Instead of opposing this mental aberration, this impossible tension between work as one thing and work as another, we are caught in its cast as it becomes a sacred halo under which we are transfixed. We will never know if we are truly emancipated from the thing to which we are indebted for setting us free. The obligation to work never ceases its interrogation, its registration of demand: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its own pursuit with more work. 'Work' works.

Likewise, for the professional artist, work can only ever be traded as a value if it 'works'; that is, if it does something. In contemporary art terms, successful 'work' can range from appearing to disturb or disrupt the norm, shake the masses out of their semi-hypnotised states, critically affect, stir the emotions, send us to sleep, effect social change, effect magic, make money or maintain a cultural hierarchy, amongst a host of other hierarchies.

In seeming opposition to this, the amateur artist doesn't think of his/her creations as work, but as something silhouetted against work. It is precisely the sensibility of a hobby or interest in relation to work which makes it pleasurable and gives a sense of value to the process. Does the amateur consider if their creations are 'working'? Does the amateur even consider the idea of 'work' at all? The affectation of art as 'work' serves to delineate that which is professional against that which





isn't, that which is serious against that which is flippant and this delineation is understood through the presence of 'text'. It's a depressing thought that the professional makes 'work' and 'texts', the amateur makes 'pictures' and 'stories'.

A similar division was made in the excellent, but sadly now defunct, American art magazine *Art/Text* through the 1990s. In this case, the signal of the word text tells us that the art is there to be read, like any other sign in the complex web of signs that make up our worlds. The effect is to legitimatise the untethered effects of the work by framing it within the cupped hands of theoretical critique and thus integrity. This cupping never really allows theory to touch the work but carefully frames it within its protective enclosure, indeed, often in order to protect it from the critical aspects of the very theory by which it seeks to be framed. Victor Burgin¹ amongst others has always maintained this theoretical cupping was subordinate to the demands of the art market. In short, the presence of 'text' does what countless thousands of art students (and numerous artists) have felt it necessary to do over the years; that is, to justify and legitimize the idea of the work as 'work', which, once done, allows the work (or indeed the market) to proceed as normal, as pictures and stories. What is at stake in text + work is the complex delineation of a profession.

Steve Dutton, Reader in Fine Art, Sheffield Hallam University
Dr. Steve Swindells, Principal Lecturer, University of Huddersfield

¹ Victor Burgin, 'The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Post-modernisms', in *When Attitudes Became Form: 1965 to 1972*, Kettles Yard, Cambridge, 1984. Reprinted: *The End of Art Theory : Criticism and Postmodernity*, London: Macmillan, 1986.

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Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells have worked together on projects since 1998. Their work has no restrictions on media, and includes text orientated art work within publications, installations, photography, video, and performance. Collaborative projects include 'Entropic Gym' at Mercer Union Centre for Contemporary Art, Toronto, 'Power to the People' at CAFKA Kitchener, Ontario, 'Brownfield' for Art Sheffield 03 and 'Plaza Song' for SI Alternative Action Plan, Sheffield. More recently they have shown work in 'Txtrapolis' at NAFA Gallery, Singapore, 'Emergency 2' at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth and 'Folklore' at APT, London. They have produced a number of books and publications, most recently 'Misleading Epiphenomena', co-written with Dr. Barbara Penner, which was published in September 2005 by Artwords Press. Dutton and Swindells have forthcoming exhibitions in Seoul and Manila later in 2006.

Steve Dutton is a Reader in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. Steve Swindells has recently completed a PhD on the relationship between art and citizenship.



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Event

Steve Dutton + Steve Swindells
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6 February – 24 March 2006

text + work would like to invite you to an event that is being hosted in connection with this exhibition on the 22nd February 2006.

Artist's Talk

Wednesday 22 February 2006
Lecture Theatre One, 4.30pm – 5.30pm

for further information on the exhibition and event contact:

Violet McClean Gallery Officer

t 01202 363351

e vmcclean@aib.ac.uk



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6 February – 24 March 2006

The Gallery, The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Opening Hours

9.00am – 8.00pm Monday – Thursday (Term Time)
9.00am – 6.00pm Monday – Thursday (Summer Time)
9.00am – 4.00pm Friday
9.00am – 1.00pm Saturday (Term Time)
Closed Bank Holidays

Violet McClean Gallery Officer

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