

Josef Strau's Throwaway Economy



Josef Strau, '18Iniquities', 2008. Installation view, Greene Naftali, New York. Photograph: Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali

If I were to write about Josef Strau the way he writes, in a casual, haphazard, 'disposable' fashion, as he puts it, it would be a freewheeling stream-of-consciousness – an editorial mess of lowercase letters, missing commas and misplaced punctuation. Intensely personal, even diaristic, I might begin with how I awoke to my cat eagerly chewing my hair; my slight hangover; or that I'm currently typing on my friend's old laptop because I, in a tragic lapse of judgement, left mine a few months ago in a grocery store, by the navel oranges. The writing, in sum, would be about nothing and everything – a surplus of throwaway thoughts: eating habits, drinking and dining excursions, and the like.

Formerly a critic for *Texte zur Kunst* and other publications, Strau turned to automatic writing as a means to an end. In an interview for *Mousse* he notes 'just to get relaxed, I decided that [...] I'd write anything, something, nothing, a disposable text, and then afterwards, start with the real catalogue text. So I wrote about the party the night before, and so on.' Realising later that the means was more interesting than the end, and that it compromised none of the latter's theoretical efficacy, Strau seized upon his freewheeling thoughts, lifting them, like Brutalist text blocks, onto posters and canvas for easier readability. Interspersed throughout gallery spaces on the wall, the floor, or on cardboard and foam wall partitions and structures, his unedited prose is lit by an eclectic array of flea market reading

lamps. Dumpy, gangly, surrounded by a litter of cords and often life-size, they're strangely bodily and resemble ramshackle viewers-cum-readers – phenomenological stand-ins for this particularly eccentric reading experience that's both formal and functional, writing and representation.



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For his 2008 solo exhibition '18Iniquities' at Greene Naftali in New York, long, squat cardboard tunnels snaked through the gallery. From a bird's eye point of view, they spelled the letters 'J', 'L' and 'E'. Made of boxes held together with tape, these crude architectural structures, ostensibly made for children, contained small reading lamps paired with large posters. Featuring various permutations of blocky text, some posters featured a column of writing hanging limply in white space, while others featured two to three sections of different type nested awkwardly within each other. Some of these, on the recommendation of Strau's therapist (as recounted on the posters), recount biblical stories involving Jacob and Joseph. Another details, in great length, a dinner Strau had with his father and uncle, who later praised one of his ratty old Christian Dior jackets and claimed the artist had 'really good style'.

With their quotidian narratives of urban social scenes, as well as their typographical play with text and blank page space, Strau's poster and canvas works bear a canny resemblance to those of sometimes-collaborator Bernadette Corporation, whose exhibition in the same space later that year, 'The Complete Poem' (2009), was comprised of vitrines containing 130 pages of collectively-authored poetry. Musings on fashion labels like Acne and dumb statements such as 'Skinny jeans are very tight' skipped across white pages in fits and stutters, the text changing form at will for maximum visual interest. While Strau is less directly engaged with consumer culture as Bernadette Corporation, commodity critique is part and parcel of his work, if only because it's part and parcel of life in a twenty-first century global economy – whether it relates to tossed out junk like cardboard and bedside lamps, wardrobes or drunkenly eaten canned cat food, recollections of which Strau intrepidly segues into a discussion of

Roland Barthes's theories on photography for a catalogue essay on Josephine Pryde. Though there are no collaborations with fashion photographers, as Bernadette Corporation did with David Vasiljevic, fashion is omnipresent in Strau's pictorialised text in the sense that, to Strau, serious musings on contemporary subjectivity are tackled, obliquely, in the most non-serious, disposable ways, an automatic writing somewhat akin to 'word vomit', as Plastics ingénue Cady Heron would phrase her unfettered speech in the movie *Mean Girls* (2004). Strau's dialectical push-pulls between what's considered a proper and improper text, or a meaningful and a meaningless one, underlines the fact that for Barthes, 'without content, it [fashion] then becomes the spectacle human beings grant themselves to make the insignificant signify'. Strau's humdrum musings about the most insignificant things – navigating his computer's operating system, obscure allegories, ugly bedside lamps – detail, in bits and pieces, his particularly active position as an artist and intellectual and its exemplification of post-Fordist, flexible models of working.



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That Strau is represented by a powerhouse New York commercial art gallery is particularly ironic, considering his former cult status within the Cologne art scene in the 1980s and 90s, which he infamously dressed down in 2006 for his essay 'The Non-Productive Attitude'. In the text he claimed artists in Cologne made a point of playing the *part* of the artist, as a way to avoid institutional and commercial legitimation, while tangibly producing very little. In lieu of an object or gallery-based practice, casual conversation, café culture and the leisurely trappings of bohemia constituted an entirely social, if ultimately naïve, form of output. In its refusal to play into dominant power structures, such an attitude might recall Giorgio Agamben's notion of *inoperativeness* – a form of productive withdrawal that he defined, politically, as a 'generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted.' It might refer to this model, that is, if the Cologne scene had not been in fact eventually exhausted, Strau

claims, and in the end, more of an 'obsolete or boring' style than a philosophy that was just as socially postured as that which it fought against.

Strau regards the material refusal of his youth with some hard-won cynicism, and seems to have moved on, in a sense. While the more Marxist-inclined could allege complacency, this would be an easy accusation. Strau, like many other artists in Greene Naftali's roster, is critically aware of his position within it, noting 'I think very much about the strange relationships between my life, my work and economics. I have explained works in economic terms like I make texts, but I organise a trade system for it, which maintains the practice and writing financially, like transforming flea market lamps into a system of meaning and narratives and producing financial value through this.' Parlaying lamps, detritus and disposable texts into, theoretically speaking, disposable commodities, Strau has found new ways to make the market, and institutional representation, work for him, by *working* – and in the process, he's adopted a more realistic stance on art, culture and the larger economy.



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