

OF THE SURFACE OF THINGS
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*And we make of what we see, what we see clearly
And have seen, a place dependent on ourselves.*¹

At which point does an exhibition begin, how does it take shape, and when does it end? An exhibition, after all, is a precise yet brief arrangement of material in a given space or situation that is only activated through the encounter with an audience.

*The art of observing ought in that case to be treated to the same solicitude as the art of creating...The exhibition...shows art but is mainly geared towards the experience of seeing something as art. The observer is [...] an inseparable part of the work.*²

The exhibition will be titled after its installation is a promise by the artist Alex Farrar to commit to a new name on completion of the display. Accordingly his final exhibition action immediately preceding the opening will coincide with the moment of naming. This act is deeply *performative* in that something on the cusp of becoming tips over into a state of presence, and it arrives in a material state through a 'speech act'. According to linguist J.L. Austin naming is neither describing nor reporting something, but actually *doing* it – bringing a new state of things into play³. The exhibition is consequently at once the result of having been named and the embodiment of its title.

Many artists refuse to title, using the generic placeholder 'untitled', while others prefer not to date their works – strategies that challenge the fixity of content and time. Often artists report a preference for the moment when the show is completed, when the space is prepared but lacks the presence of the public, a true instance of the 'private view', before relinquishing the work into an ever-more dispersed and striated public realm. In a digital age the majority of exhibitions and works are not experienced as bodily encounters, but as essentially private representations once removed – digital, broadcast or printed.

The book *Wimper* (the Dutch term for eyelash, or a potential misspelling of the English for 'whimper' presently held by the reader is such an extension of the exhibition, which may be experienced elsewhere, long after the space has been vacated. It operates on the limits of material evidence by reprising a series of earlier prints entitled *Behavioural Residues (second sweep)*, featuring barely perceptible images of single eyelashes. Apart from their significance as intimate materials discarded by the body over time, such as hair or skin, they submit to the almost nothing of an aesthetics of disappearance, but equally to a dialectics of misunderstanding that commits to a lack of closure.

By way of an analogy, the novelist Raymond Roussel's writings follow a certain 'verbal anamorphosis: within the conventional meaning of an expression lies a subversive antipodal meaning that, when mapped, creates a landscape in between that can be filled with narrative, a journey [...] conceptualized around a minimal shift of meaning.'⁴ His technique, called the *procédé* deploys homonymic puns to create 'sweet spots' from which double readings are brought into play. Equally, Farrar's wordplay with the books' title seeks to cast doubt on its unambiguous interpretation, suggesting that *Wimper* be an opening gambit rather than a closing move.

1 Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, 1942.

2 Susanna Slöör, in *De ou par Marcel Duchamp par Ulf Linde*, Jan Aman and Daniel Birnbaum eds., Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013, P.84

3 J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, London, 1962 (1955), op.cit.

4 http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/roussel_three.pdf

Farrar's artists' books tap into a sustained legacy, which harks back to the early 1960s with notable exponents of the form such as Ed Ruscha, Yoko Ono, David Lamelas, Sol LeWitt, Dieter Roth and Martin Kippenberger, among others. While they may be considered limited edition artworks, they also incorporate literary and graphic elements from exhibition catalogues and magazines. However, they do not seek to chronicle and respond to a particular exhibition, preferring their own autonomy.

According to seminal critic and curator Lucy Lippard the ambiguity and tension between art and literature is not a recent phenomenon, and can be traced to the dissolution of the boundaries into an expanded disciplinary field:

*As long as there are Art Shows and books as Art Shows as distinguished from books as literature, and until it is possible to pick up a book-as-object and neither know nor care whether it's called art or literature of fiction or non-fiction, it matters. [...] No art, no matter how much it resembles life or literature, can call itself anything but art as long as it has been, is, or ever will be shown in an art context.*⁵

The illusion of scale is writ large in all art books since they include images or discussion of artworks; neither description of a thing nor photographic representation can ever accurately reprise its experience; accordingly, Farrar's eyelashes remain almost indiscernible on the paper, their tiny curved bodies lost in the white vastness.⁶

Theorist Julia Kristeva describes the notion of the abject as a subjective horror, the feeling when an individual experiences, or is confronted by one's fragile "corporeal reality", as in the sight of death. We distance ourselves from the not 'I', from elements and substances that emanate from the body, and which become taboo once externalised or separated: hair, skin, blood, sweat. These locate a liminal position between inner and outer in which meaning collapses.⁷

Farrar's works in the exhibition - *sweat paintings*, *'umble prints*, and *Behavioural Residues* - comment on the body's broken extensions by transcribing bodily emissions, examining cavities and showcasing torn-off fingernails. Once their intimate connection to the body is severed these residues and castoffs enter the realm of the Other, their detachment eliciting feelings of alienation and revulsion. However, their transmogrification from bodily parts into works of art accomplished by shifts in scale, colour and material alter the reception. We enter into the domain of the symbolic: sweat becomes solvent/paint, lashes are printed, and cuticles are upscaled and varnished lead-casts, thus moving from indiscernibility to striking conspicuousness. Farrar adopts the names of commercial products and colours for some of the works such as *999 Red* or *Cherry Bomb* delighting in the falsely amplified language of branding and consumption, which dumbs down the relationship with the consumer, ironically subverting critic Susan Sontag who, contrariwise, enjoyed 'thickening her prose' with Latinate terms.⁸

Today, we oscillate between the hypervisibility generated by consumption and social media preening on the one hand, and individuals' physical invisibility; when not actively making purchases, sharing, liking, or promoting ourselves – activities that leave a digital trace of sorts – we disappear from view. We point, tick, swipe, touch, repeating abstract gestures of digital and economic presence understood by the algorithm. Interaction with a screen reduces our bodies to a wholly unnatural two-dimensional presence. 'Planarity' argues theorist David Summers 'is all pervasive today and associated with the Anthropocene.'

5 Lucy R. Lippard, in *Publication*, David Lamelas, Nigel Greenwood Inc.Ltd, London 1970, p.22.

6 Or indeed entirely swamped by the serried ranks of text on spreads that feature commissioned writings; here, the single eyelash is barely discernible.

7 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, op.cit.

8 Susan Sontag, quoted in Brian Dillon, *Essayism*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, London, 2017, p.98.

Planarity is a reductive spatial abstraction that pervades the production and display of two-dimensional works in particular. If exhibition-making once sought to resolve formal harmonies, it is today typified by a questioning of the relationship to a space that is often awkward and obstreperous, exacerbated by the presence of the spectator.

The paintings dominate the space, the pastel shades and muted hues of the fabric that serve as surfaces, camouflage barely present stains. But, once acknowledged, like all marks and imperfections, the human eye gravitates to them. Their varied contours suggest a myriad of forms and objects, while the bodily references are confirmed by the allusions to human sweat in the title. Bodies leave humid imprints or residues of presence once they have vacated a space, most famously in the work of French artist Yves Klein whose *Anthropometries* and *Fire paintings* used models as 'human brushes'. In the former, the models painted themselves in Klein's trademark blue, before pressing their bodies into the prepared canvas or paper surfaces, while the latter, culminating in the *FC series*⁹, combined this process with live gas fire and spray paint to complete the silhouettes.

As Farrar lays out works against the walls of the gallery one of the *sweat paintings* - a grey stain on white stretched material resembling an image of a small headless female figure - stands out. 'A work of art' writes theorist Juhani Pallasmaa 'functions as another person, with whom one unconsciously converses.'¹⁰

It triggers the involuntary playback of a distant encounter in the memory of the writers, patchy, self-serving, furtive. Her name is Elena Palumbo-Mosca, a diminutive former dancer and model from Turin, clad immaculately in close fitting black, wearing 1950s spectacles and kitten heels. She works for the European Union in the Belgian capital and comes along as an unexpected guest on a long drive with friends from Brussels to Paris and Amsterdam. The outing is exhausting and fractious as too many destinations are visited in too short a timespan, yet Elena never once loses her composure or temper, unlike others in the party.

A subsequent visit to her home in Brussels reveals a pristine space presented as a single dwelling with white walls, ceiling and floor, punctuated only with slim plinths with major sculptures by Arman and Yves Klein. Her modest camp bed topped with a coarse grey blanket, the only other item of furniture in the room, holds a clowder of 7 black cats, closely huddled together. Also referred to as 'Princess Helena' in one of his works, she was Klein's favourite model and his collaborator until his untimely death. In an interview about her part in his work she said:

*I think I will leave a shadow of myself behind somewhere.*¹¹

Klein's works rely on the physical presence of human figures, quite literally pressed into service, while Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974) instructs spectators to push themselves against the wall, and to imagine their bodies pressing back, considering also elements such as perspiration and odour. The work foregrounds the body as a conceptual tool, playing out or imagining a hypothetical situation.

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty maintains that we touch the world through the skin - where inside and outside commingle - suggesting that any kind of critical distance or objectivity on the subject of the skin is impossible since the latter is implicated in the coherence of the body. Contrariwise Farrar's *sweat paintings* operate in the sphere of *representation*; the stains are not made by bodies, nor is their substance actual sweat. Instead, they emblematised and scaled sweat patterns photographed and collected by the artist. But though sweat is the result of physical exertion, it can also be associated with anxiety - we perspire involuntarily when placed under scrutiny or stress. The sincerity of waking

9 According to Christie's, FC1 (Fire Colour One, 1962) completed in the year of his death, aged 34, is arguably the most important postwar artwork, estimated at \$30-40 million in 2012.

10 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 2005, p.66.

11 <https://www.vogue.com/article/the-body-electric-looking-back-over-the-world-and-work-of-artist-yves-klein?verso=true>

sweat is countered by the unproductive night sweat, when the artist idles and is perhaps beset by worry or trauma. Moreover, the pressure of an exhibition, during which the quality of his labour is examined, might cause considerable apprehension.

The so-called 'sweat standard', the application of artistic labour, is an important consideration in determining creative rights. US and UK copyright law differ in that in 'the American standard...a work meets the originality standard if it displays at least a minimal "spark" of creativity. In Britain, the traditional originality standard is often referred to as the common law "sweat standard". It requires authors to expend labour to receive protection, but does not require that labour to be creative.'¹² Curator Dominic Paterson appears to recognise Farrar's ambivalence between creative and conceptual endeavour on the one hand, and physical graft on the other. He writes:

*Sweat is...the solvent that appears to dissolve the separation between artistic and non-artistic labour, without however, reconciling the two or resolving the tension between them.*¹³

Farrar's slumped, sand filled figures, called after terms of negative growth forecasting such as: *slump, fall, slide, sag, dip, crash, and downturn*, demonstrate the failure of labour in a faltering economy, and reduces the body to a useless, awkward weight whose presence is an uncanny reminder of inertia and failure. They also recall sandbags used to avert the dangers of flooding or collapse by shoring up the burst banks of rivers and other bodies of water, or weighing down temporary road signs, compounding their overt gravity as a negative burden.

The examination of *being* is a central subject in philosophy, psychoanalysis and visual art. Metaphysics argues for a distinction between mind and matter, and artists often locate their work at the limen, the threshold between these positions, as if the porosity between the questions of 'what there is' and 'what it is like' mattered the most. Farrar argues for the importance of artistic agency throughout his oeuvre, for the priority of an open-ended practice:

*The artwork is embodied or materialised thinking, it is the product of someone who wants to make something and wants to see that product. The artist makes the work in order to produce a particular experience and undergo the result.*¹⁴

This dynamic is transferred from the process of making to the presentation of a display. In a post-installation period all solo exhibitions promote the reading of a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' or 'Total Artwork'. Thus the exhibition can be considered a practice in its own right. In *The exhibition will be titled after its installation* the evidence of the exhibitionary process remains present, inscribing the space: measuring, marking, drilling, hammering, hanging, taking down, repositioning, erasing. Every exhibition is a choreographed staging of these gestures, which are carefully removed once the work is installed. Therefore the 'implicit content of the gallery [is] declared through invisible gestures'¹⁵. In this instance, however the visitor's attention is explicitly drawn to the signs of display.

Pavel Büchler's exhibition [*Today for the last Time!*], (1974) in Prague provides a radical mutation of the installation process into the exhibition itself; it resulted with the wholesale removal of his works from the gallery for which permissions had been withheld due to an administrative error; the empty space bore only the traces of hanging, along with mud and dust derived from the visitors' presence. Such instances of institutional scrutiny chime with Farrar's practice, as a current exhibition

12 Cristin Fenzel, Still Life with "Spark" and "Sweat": the Copyrightability of Contemporary Art in the United States and the United Kingdom, *Arizona Journal*, November 2015, p.545.

13 Dominic Paterson, *Text for the Sweats*, Gallery Kamm, Berlin, 2012.

14 Janneke Wesseling, *The Perfect spectator: the experience of the artwork and reception aesthetics*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017, p.88.

15 Brian O'Doherty, *The Gallery as a Gesture*, in *Voids: A Retrospective*, Centre Pompidou, Ringier, Zurich, 2009, p.207.

strategy that reveals decisions, modifications and fine-tuning, and through his work at large which underpins aesthetic judgments with wider questions about the social, political and economic functions of art. But the accusatory stance of the project of institutional critique has little resonance with Farrar whose concerns do not lie with abstract theorems but with the pragmatic and intuitive decisions warranted by the display in the particular gallery situation.

Along with other artists, Farrar considers the exhibition as an opportunity to engage with the site as a specific location that validates the conditions of display. Christopher Williams's seminal *Drafts*, (later followed by *Revisions* and *Supplements*) first took place in Munich in 1993, and sought to keep the 'exhibitions as speculations and to avoid having the series identified with a fixed constellation of images or display tactics'.¹⁶

While the exhibition presents new configurations, it also repeats. The accumulation of works, along with the well-worn signs of display, reveals the gallery as a palimpsest in reverse – an attempt at exhausting a place by uncovering, as writer Georges Perec notably attempted in Paris, by listing every 'infra-ordinary' manifestation of the everyday in a given location. Indeed, as this text evolves the show is finally installed and the artist's promise to review its temporary title has been enacted. The placeholder has been substituted by the enumeration of every work present in the exhibition, along with the physical evidence of its display:

Faltering, light under two screw holes, with 999 Red, shadows, screws and drilled holes, flushed, then glimmer over pieces of masking tape, with screws, drilled holes and Cherry Bomb

The opening of the exhibition coincides with the exhaustion of the gallery, temporarily worn away, as Perec might have said by the continuous enumeration and rehearsal of every position. Robert Barry's seminal title *during the exhibition the gallery will be closed* (1969) still rings true as a critique of the act of display, as the audience comes to terms with the elements of appearance.

*The things that can be seen are those things as they are seen.*¹⁷

Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley are London-based curators and writers who co-direct SE8 Gallery and the imprint Mulberry Tree Press. Their books with major publishers include *Installation art*, and *Installation art in the New Millennium: Empire of the Senses*, two seminal international surveys of the practice and several monographs on Hans Op de Beeck, Stefan Brüggemann and Patrick Jolley, the result of close collaborations with artists and institutions, as well as short fictions. Their curated exhibitions encompass over 200 individual and collective projects and installations with artists such as Christian Jankowski, Phyllida Barlow, Mariko Mori, Gary Hill, Emma Hart, Andrea Büttner, João Onofre and Hollis Frampton, among others.

16 Mark Godfrey, in *Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness*, Yale University Press, New York, 2008, p.82

17 Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*.