

The Centaur and the Hummingbird

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Charles A. Csurí, *Hummingbird II*, 1969

A little over forty years ago, Harold Rosenberg observed that contemporary painting and sculpture had transmogrified into what he called “a species of centaur—half art materials, half words,”¹ a hybrid form in sharp contrast to the visual purity of the previous decade’s central artistic movement, Abstract Expressionism. Though Rosenberg himself had coined the term “action painting,” originally arguing for that mode’s existential ability to convey a record of the artist’s process on the canvas (“not a picture, but an event”² as he put it), by the late 1960s he had evidently revised this theory in light of conceptual art, minimalism, earthworks, and other developments.

Modern art, he now argued, never truly offered such direct access to experience; from its earliest beginnings, it had required the support of language, in the form of artists’ writings, curatorial statements, and criticism, in order to be understood. Experiencing the artwork itself had become insufficient; increasingly, specialized knowledge was required. “Of itself, the eye is incapable of breaking into the intellectual system that today distinguishes between objects that are art and those that are not,” Rosenberg maintained. “Given its primitive function of discriminating among things in shopping centers and on highways, the eye will recognize a Noland as a fabric design, a Judd as a stack of metal bins—until the eye’s outrageous philistinism has been subdued by the drone of formulas concerning breakthroughs in color, space, and even optical perception (this, too, unseen by the eye, of course).”³ Rosenberg imagines that for viewers without access to these “formulas,” contemporary art objects simply disappeared into the consumer landscape, seen but misunderstood.

Rosenberg suggested that the vogue for text supporting the works themselves—or in the case of the most uncompromising conceptual artists, text as the works themselves—was not a radical break with the past, but an intensification of certain pre-existing qualities. The conceptual turn was simply a more overt manifestation of a state of affairs that stretched back to the turn of the century, when the pictorial role of art was displaced by the full-scale rethinking of visual representation at the core of the various avant-gardes. Modern art had always been conceptual; in the 1960s, it just became more self-aware about it.

In the headiness of this realization, artists and critics foresaw the dematerialization of art, but this never completely happened. Today, gallery spaces of the early 21st century remain populated by Rosenberg’s word-object centaurs. Once pressed into battle against the primacy of painting and sculpture, they have evolved into less warlike beasts, a menagerie of possibilities

roaming through the expanded field. Like figures from Ovid, they exist frozen in mid-transformation from one state to the next.

"Free" is dominated by work in a post-conceptual mode that Rosenberg would recognize; it is a show in which wall text matters, and post-visit googling rewarded. Most pieces, like Aleksandra Domanovic's *19:30* (2010), Lisa Oppenheim's *The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else* (2006) or Amanda Ross-Ho's *YOU AND ME FINDINGS (ROTATED 90° CW)* (2009), remain less than fully comprehensible without recourse to information about their making. An uninformed viewer could not know that Domanovic collected a personal archive of Yugoslavian nightly news intro segments, then distributed them online for DJs to use as samples, simply by watching her two-screen video, though some variation of this back-story might be surmised. A similar issue arises with Ross-Ho's grid of gold earrings, arranged on black canvas. She displays this jewelry like a taxonomist attempting to catalog variations within a species, but nothing intrinsic to the resulting arrangement communicates how she sourced them on eBay using the keyword "earring;" with this knowledge as context, her piece looks more like a physicalized version of a search results listing. At first glance, Oppenheim's slides show photographs of sunsets re-photographed against other sunsets, their horizon-lines synched up by the photographer's hand. The work only becomes truly meaningful when one reads that she found pictures of evenings in Iraq, taken by American soldiers and uploaded to Flickr, then re-shot them against analogous views in New York.

Cursory museum-goers averse to reading would mistake these works for simply what they appear to be: a video installation of appropriated television logos and rave footage, a minimalistic grid of found earrings, a slideshow of reflexive landscape photographs. Each of these objects is epistemologically incomplete, reliant on exterior information to achieve full significance. They point beyond themselves, to events that occurred outside the gallery walls, but at the same time bear more formal integrity than mere props for ideas.

This quality of incompleteness, of meanings sequestered elsewhere, is by no means unique to the works in "Free"—innumerable examples could be cited from the past half-century. But by focusing on art that responds to the Internet, something new comes to light through this exhibition. If conceptual art is a hybrid of objects and ideas, then conceptual art has changed, because our relationship to ideas has changed. And our relationship to ideas has changed because of the Internet. The Internet has altered how we relate to ideas—how we discover them, how we distribute them, how they circulate through society, how they are hidden or revealed—and this plays out in the latter-day descendants of what Gregory Battcock called "idea art."

Consider Joel Holmberg's *Legendary Account* (2007-10), presented at the New Museum in the form of six pieces of paper pasted to an expanse of sheetrock, each color-printed with a page from Yahoo! Answers. These half-dozen examples are taken from an ongoing series in which Holmberg, under his Yahoo! ID "jlhmberg," posts absurdly open-ended questions to the popular knowledge-sharing site, verging on the logic of Zen koans. In the site's section on "Wrestling," he posts the question, "How can you occupy space?" In an area for "Men's Health," he asks, "When does post-coital end?" The wisdom of crowds remains dumbfounded in the face of such disordered queries, yet users nonetheless feel compelled to respond, if only to express their confusion. *Legendary Account* attempts to parody the online truism of "collectivity is correctness" by pushing the process to its limits; the appearance of the piece in "Free" raises further conundrums.

The first is the question of documentation: do the printed-out sheets of paper mounted at the New Museum constitute the work, or are they just evidence of something that happened (or continues to happen) elsewhere? The answer depends on whether *Legendary Account* is seen from a medium-specific point of view—*Legendary Account* as a work of internet art—or a post-conceptual one. A medium-specific response would be that these bits of paper provide images of something that is meant to be experienced online, and as such, can only be properly understood in that context. Looking at *Legendary Account* in light of post-conceptualism sidesteps this issue. The replacement of performances with their documentation in the gallery is an established practice for art; performances are by their nature ephemeral, exhibitions require

something to exhibit, and therefore to bemoan the illegitimacy of recordings would be unproductive in light of their utility. Like Domanovic's video projection, Holmberg's paper-and-sheetrock installation is an "incomplete" object pointing towards the existence of an artistic process outside of itself. On his own website, Holmberg chronicles the work through screenshots of the questions and their responses, calling them "performance documentation," and does not link to the original pages. Some of his questions can be found by searching the Yahoo! Answers archive, while others cannot.

But querying the Yahoo! Answers database for Holmberg's originals reveals something significant: any number of equally ridiculous questions posed by other users, like "At what point does your soul enter?" or "How is one supposed to know the difference between pre-coital and post-coital?" After wading through the proliferation of badly worded, inscrutable, juvenile or prankish postings on Yahoo! Answers, it becomes clear that the inquiries posed as part of Holmberg's *Legendary Account* are essentially indistinguishable from these other "real" examples when experienced *in situ*. Therefore, a salient aspect of Holmberg's performance is that it is invisible as a performance to fellow users of Yahoo! Answers. In this regard, *Legendary Account* could be compared to Vito Acconci's *Proximity Piece (Room Situation)*, performed during the Jewish Museum's 1970 exhibition "Software," which consisted of the artist walking close enough to unsuspecting attendees until such point they stepped away in discomfort. To attendees of that exhibition who were unaware of *Proximity Piece*, Acconci must have seemed like just another socially aberrant New Yorker. One is tempted to say that *Legendary Account* only becomes an artwork after the performance, when the screenshots are posted to Holmberg's site. Prior to this point, it existed only as part of the normal ebb and flow of sketchy online weirdness. As the old *New Yorker* cartoon says, on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog. Here, we might instead propose that on the Internet, nobody knows you're an artist.

Holmberg's work presents an extreme example of a phenomenon well-known to contemporary internet artists: given the proliferation of creative activity online—amateur, corporate and otherwise—it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to tell when something online should be thought of as art, or indeed to imagine purely formal criteria that would distinguish art from any number of very art-like creations. Like Rosenberg's Nolan fabric designs and Judd metal bins, online artworks easily disappear into the flux. Consider, then, the role played by the information presented at <http://www.joelholmberg.com>. Holmberg's homepage embraces the conventions of the artist's curriculum vitae and portfolio within its formal parody of news site. Examples of his work are categorized under tabs marked "video," "sound," "sculpture," "internet" and so forth, and a "bio" section states clearly that "Joel Holmberg (b. 1982, Maryland, USA) Currently in Brooklyn, NY : creates artwork with computers and bare hands."

In the decades-long discussion around the centrality of the readymade to contemporary art, the nomination of an object to the status of art is classically thought of as occurring in the space of the gallery, as if the white walls themselves were necessary for this transformative magic. But for *Legendary Account*, the paper print-outs on view at "Free" comprise merely one version of the piece, and arguably a non-essential one—any number of platforms could be used to show it, in an "art space" or not. The status of Holmberg's *Legendary Account* postings as art is primarily supported by Holmberg's assertion of his own professional status as artist. Put another way, *Legendary Account*'s status as art can't be separated from Holmberg's own self-authored online presence. *Joelholmberg.com* is not merely a means to document his artworks; its ultimate purpose is to document himself as an artist.

This process is not particular to Holmberg's work, of course. The online portfolio plays a key role for artists in general, but internet artists especially, and we should consider how incredibly easy this has become. Through the publication of an online portfolio, any individual can confer upon her- or himself the status of artist, and thereby the status of art to her or his works. The power of the online portfolio, however, is purely nominative, rather than evaluative. One cannot, more crucially, evaluate one's own work as good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, important or not. To state the obvious: the artist can

declare him- or her-self an artist, but only other people can decide if he or she is a good one. These kinds of judgments can be stated on the portfolio as evidence of outside evaluation: academic degrees, exhibition history, critical reception, fellowships and residencies, where and how the work may be sold. The citation and listing of such facts becomes an argument for the kind of artist as well—commercial, fine, amateur, student, etc.

This question of the artist's institutional existence is central to Jill Magid's *Becoming Tarden*, installed at the New Museum in the form of a shelf bearing multiple paperbacks of her non-fiction novel, also entitled *Becoming Tarden*, and a vitrine containing a letter and a manuscript. Magid's novel details her time spent as artist-in-residence at the headquarters of AIVD, the Dutch secret service agency. The center of the manuscript, containing the text of the novel's narrative, has been removed from its binding; the book lies face open in the vitrine with its inner spine exposed, the novel's prologue and epilogue sections lying flat to either side. The letter to its left details the removal of the novel's body from its exhibition at Tate Modern by delegates of the AIVD, as per a prior agreement between Magid and the organization. At the New Museum, wall text informs visitors that they are welcome to read the copies of *Becoming Tarden* on the shelf by the vitrine, and that they can also purchase copies of the book downstairs at the museum bookstore.



Jill Magid, *Becoming Tarden*, 2010 (Photo by Nick Hunt)

At just over 180 pages, *Becoming Tarden* is short for a novel, but not so brief that a museum-goer would likely read the entire thing in the course of visiting the exhibition. The sections of the book are arranged out of order: first its Epilogue, then its Prologue, then "The Redacted Manuscript," which is most of the book, and finally a brief postscript. In the course of the novel, Magid makes it clear that it is the book *Becoming Tarden* which is the central work produced by her residency: she decided to create a collective portrait of AIVD by becoming one of its agents, and interviewing fellow agents about their lives and jobs. Composed as a memoir, these interviews form the basis of the Redacted Manuscript, with substantial sections removed by the agency after a vetting process, represented by blank spaces in the text. Magid's residency was the result of Dutch arts funding laws that required a certain percentage of the budget of new state buildings to be set aside for this purpose. As the book chronicles, the literary form of *Becoming Tarden* was a surprise to the organization, which expected Magid to create a physical, singular art object—something more along the lines of a sculpture or installation to be displayed in its headquarters. In the Epilogue, Magid reports that the idea for exhibiting the novel in a vitrine came from the director of the organization itself.

My advisor interrupts him. *What are you proposing?*

He directs his answer to me. *We want you to think of the book as an object of art. We will redact it and put it inside the vitrine with your notebooks where it will remain, permanently.*

You want me to put it under glass so that it will no longer function as a book but as sculpture?

Yes. He blinks his eyes rapidly. *It becomes an object of art.*⁴

This exchange appears as part of a scene detailing one set of negotiations between Magid and AIVD, here represented by the unidentified "Director of the Organization." As portrayed in the novel, the process of producing *Becoming*

Tarden involves many such negotiations for Magid, with a population of lawyers, representatives of government agencies, and members of AIVD. The removal of large portions of the Manuscript, via AIVD's redaction process, transforms the novel from a more straightforward memoir into a piece of experimental fiction, lending an erotic mystery to its lacunae; this feeling is heightened by Magid's writing, which often contains implicit or explicit elements of romance and seduction. Because of these negotiations, *Becoming Tarden* ultimately becomes a collaboration between Magid and the secret service agency, both sides working to determine the final shape and nature of the product. As such, the novel provides a picture—a documentary parody, even—of the European-style administered artist, given resources and status by the state only through an agreement to function within its parameters.

There is a web version of *Becoming Tarden*, containing some of the documents from the project, but the work is not primarily about online culture. At "Free," Magid's work is situated close by the photos of Trevor Paglen, which likewise seek to provide visual form to the governmental control of information. Neither is directly about the internet but both could be said to exist in its negative space, being about information withheld rather than shared. By becoming complicit in the control of information by an intelligence agency, Magid provides a picture of this mode of power. The controversies around and repercussions of the Wikileaks diplomatic cable leaks, currently unfolding as this essay is being written, underscore this juxtaposition of government control and the possibilities of online file-sharing technologies.

Becoming Tarden takes its title from the main character of Jerzy Kosinski's 1998 novel *Cockpit*, which Magid purchased at an English-language bookshop in The Hague. Kosinski's Tarden is an ex-spy who, as the book's current Amazon.com product description puts it, "thriving on psychological pressure, penetrates the lives of others, leading his momentary partners in a ruthless dance of complex intrigue." Magid becomes fixated on the concept of the "hummingbird" in *Cockpit*, and quotes this passage from Kosinski's novel at the end of her Prologue:

I was one of the specially trained groups of agents called 'the hummingbirds'. The men and women of this group are so valuable that to protect their covers no central file is kept on them and their identities are seldom divulged to other agents.

Most hummingbirds remain on assignment as long as they lead active cover lives, usually as high-ranking government officials, military or cultural officials based in foreign countries. Others serve as businessmen, scientists, editors, writers and artists.

But I always used to wonder what would happen if a hummingbird vanished, leaving no proof...⁵

"I study *Cockpit* now as a guide to a kind of organization I have yet to see," Magid writes in the Manuscript itself. "In Holland, I am looking to reveal Kosinski's world, the kind of service that he describes, where the hummingbirds pull all the strings and know all the truths... To find the face at the center I will become a hummingbird and I will use the Organization to learn how to be one, because I believe it does this, it can do this, it is doing it all the time."⁶ A black emblem of a flying hummingbird is included on the novel's title page, and again in the center of the last page, facing the inside back cover.

Kosinski's hummingbirds go so deeply undercover that they blend into the world around them, unseen in their operation. Perhaps the word derives from the flight patterns of tiny real-life hummingbirds, always flitting just out of view. *Becoming Tarden* presents a number of different disappearances: information deleted from the page via redaction, the original book vanishing into the archives of the AIVD, Magid herself trying to melt into the structure of the organization. The hummingbird stands for an ominous kind of control through secrecy, but also a form of personal transcendence through seamless transformation. The artist and the agent become mirrors of one another; both provide metaphors for general questions of social identity.

"Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur," Seth Price writes in his essay "Dispersion." "The art system usually corrals errant works, but how

could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?" This quote calls to mind the softcover edition of *Becoming Tarden*, sitting on shelves in the New Museum, a book that the AIVD didn't wish to see available to the public, yet there it is. Price seems to envision something distributed through regular bookstores or other non-art channels, but *Becoming Tarden*, judging from the information on its colophon and lack of ISBN, appears to be a small print run, its availability likely limited to art spaces.

A chapbook version of "Dispersion" has been available for sale at similar venues, but has circulated far more widely as a pdf available from Price's site. The essay considers the impact of conceptual art's legacy on artists' practices, and how its original ethos might continue today. According to Price, conceptual art asked the question "What would it mean to step outside of this carefully structured system?" only to be re-contained by the artworld through entering its archives as "documentation and discourse." He offers that a more successful route might be to create work for the realm of "distributed media," which he defines "as social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazine, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data diskettes." One of the most dynamic spaces of distributed media would be the internet, and, as Price says, "Anything on the internet is a fragment, provisional, pointing elsewhere. Nothing is finished. What a time you chose to be born!"

"Dispersion" is displayed at "Free," in a form that frustrates normal reading practices, as the wall-mounted *Essay With Knots* (2008). Like other works at "Free," it too points elsewhere, in this case to the original essay itself. Blown up to enormous size, a complete set of its design galleys is printed onto sheets of plastic that in turn have been vacuum-sealed over large knots of rope, over which the words stretch and streak. Its large-scale industrial materials make *Essay With Knot* seem both monumental and disposable, as if it were an item that had been wrongly constructed, or a strange sort of container that might be discarded to get at the ropes inside. It imagines the essay as a means to package (and perhaps ship) a set of conundrums.

Essay With Knots appears to convey an uneasiness with its own physical necessity, and this paradoxical ambivalence is found in "Dispersion" as well. Past failures to transcend the institutions of the art world, Price writes, have stumbled because "immersing art in life runs the risk of seeing the status of art—and with it, the status of artist—disperse entirely." Yet the utopian urge to exist beyond the art world through distributed media seems doomed in the same manner. "Complete enclosure means that one cannot write a novel, compose music, produce television, and still retain the status of Artist," Price writes. He suggests that the freedoms of distributed media, if fully embraced, would become a kind of exile. But at the same time, Price cites disciplines like film, music, fashion and performance as producing "some of the most interesting recent artistic activity," all happening "outside the art market and its forums."

This may be why "Free" contains more centaurs than true hummingbirds. Even as immaterial a work as Holmberg's maintains a thin silver cord tying it to the institutions of the art world, and plays a game of ontological chicken with its own existence as art. But the questions raised by these latter-day hybrids of objects and ideas go beyond old chestnuts of aesthetic theory. In Rosenberg's age, the combination of material and immaterial may have had a rush of novelty. In 2010, it seems like just part of the information-rich environment we move through every day. Every object in the world now has an image that can be captured, a name to be searched; each thing in our lives provides a potential link. Perhaps we should stop thinking about the failure of conceptualism to transcend the art world, just long enough to notice that it has, in fact, overtaken the world as such.

1. Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Words," *The New Yorker*, 29 March 1969, 100.

2. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 25.

3. Rosenberg, "Art and Words," 110.

4. Jill Magid, *Becoming Tarden*, (N.p.:n.p., 2010), 21.

5. *Ibid.*, 46.