

IAN WHITTESEA

SOME BOOKS AND LIGHT TO READ THEM BY

TEXT BY ELINE VERSTEGEN

They are waiting.  
Waiting for me.  
For me to speak.  
They do not know that.

They do not know what will happen.  
They do not know nothing will happen, if I do not speak.  
They do not know nothing might happen, even when I speak.

I welcome them.  
Some, I see, startle.  
“It has begun.”

I soothe them.  
I ask them to remain quiet.  
To forget their day-to-day cares.  
To breathe in, and out.  
This is important.

They are neatly lined up, one after the other, on a winding staircase in an artificially lit and chilly hall. When I ask them to continue their descent into the cavernous chamber, the front of the immobile mass moves first. I love this accordion choreography.

The earthworm now has dissolved, the individual segments find their own place in the dark and damp space. Some are distracted or disoriented already. Some are succeeding to empty, following their breath. The silent focussing on unfocussing is difficult, I admit.  
I have seen all sorts of attempts before.

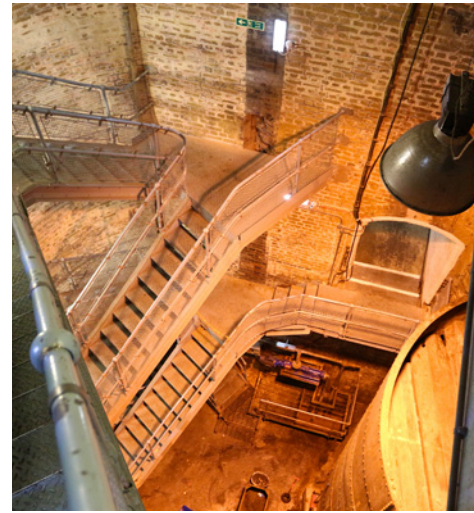
“One, two, three, four, this is long, I cannot do this...”  
“Are there not going to be any real coloured clouds?”  
“Is this it?”

It is inevitable to lose some along the way.  
There is nothing to spectate.  
It is a concept I articulate.

In the Art Night 2017 iteration of Ian Whittlesea's *Becoming Invisible*, participants were led into the Bascule Chamber of Tower Bridge in London in groups of fifty for an esoteric mass hallucination. The aim was to split light into its constituent parts and then recombine them into a glowing white cloud that enveloped (and thus rendered invisible) everyone through a series of breathing and visualisation exercises. The instructions for these exercises were recited by hypnotherapist Ruth Sabrosa. Her seemingly detached delivery, factual and without a hint of subjectivity, was key. Precisely in its characterlessness, her speech already had a physiological impact: the perfect diction appeased the audience, brought it to slow down and be open for what was to come. Moreover, the disembodied voice enabled the audience to embody the practice themselves. For that was exactly what was necessary: the participant's active involvement. The piece relied on the trust, imagination and knowledge of the beholder.

*The work of art comes about and exists in the mind.*

All of Whittlesea's artistic projects share this characteristic. His works are about ideas and materialising them, mostly through words, so that the viewer is directly affected and the imagination occupied long thereafter. Hence, "text in the expanded field", as he has called it, plays a pivotal part throughout his practice. On the one hand, he explicitly deals with the legacy of conceptual art, for example by engaging with the use of language or instructions as primary means to emphasize concepts (rather than visual forms) whilst infusing the final result with a dense set of art historical references. On the other hand, he is drawn to esoteric traditions, whose theories he explores curiously and profoundly, but also approaches conceptually. More than separate pieces, his practice consists of research projects that manifest themselves in a variety of media. Transcending traditional categorizations, Whittlesea has worked in painting, posters, prints and projections, but books always take a special place. They are not merely an illustration or reproduction of a prior piece, but rather exist on their own as an "alternative space" to develop work. Specifically, they are considered functional manuals for transcendental exercise, guiding the reader to (re-)experience a moment of occult spirituality.



*Becoming Invisible*  
The Bascule Chamber of Tower Bridge, London  
Art Night, 2017

In the *Becoming Invisible* project, many of these elements can be discerned. At its heart stands research into a rite of disappearance, influenced by the traditions and thoughts of alchemists, theosophists and rosicrucians. The body of work Whittlesea has produced includes a self-written script for the meditation; video works showing gallery staff as they individually perform the exercise; a series of paintings of quotes, of the number seven, and of abstract monochromes, serving as aid to and representation of the altered state of the participant; and an eponymous publication, generated by his own textual guidelines for both the exercise and painted imagery. The latest addition was the *Art Night son-et-lumiere*, a conceptually underpinned, communal, immersive and experiential surrender to being in the moment at a specific time and place - or rather not being, as it aims for imperceptibility - through an esoteric performance.

This conceptual and multidisciplinary approach and occult fascination can also be found in Whittlesea's work on *Mazdaznan*. Inspired by a picture of former Bauhaus lecturer and Foundation course originator Johannes Itten performing exercises with his students, Whittlesea has delved into the history and practices of the *Mazdaznan* religion (or cult), which regards breathing exercises and diet as the way to self-realisation. Whittlesea has already unfolded this research project in the form of an illustrated and annotated edition of the *Mazdaznan Health & Breath Culture* instruction manual, originally published by its founder Dr. Ha'nish in 1902. There is also a series of lightboxes showing Foundation Students from Kingston University performing these exercises and finally a related light installation.

In the latter work, a single incandescent bulb - General Electric's 'Mazda' model, supposedly named after Akura Mazda, the universal god of *Mazdaznan* precursor zoroastrianism - is suspended from the ceiling and continuously fades in and out on the rhythm of the *Mazdaznan* breathing exercises. As it fades, or breathes, visitors unconsciously respond to its language, syncing their own breathing. The light bulb thus exists as an object in itself, but as Piet Mondriaan said: "What appears to us as an object is also a force." *A Breathing Bull* is not about staring



*A Breathing Bull*  
Marlborough Contemporary, London, 2019

into the empty white cube gallery space, but about going beyond tangible reality and connecting to an immaterial sensibility. Its aim is to open the mental space of the viewers, to enable them to enter a state of transcendence, or to consider the possibility of such a state in relation to the work of art. Furthermore, the **Mazdaznan** project has recently seen a continuation in the form of the publication **Egyptian Postures**, a guide to the most advanced **Mazdaznan** exercises which Whittlesea illustrated with photographs he made of actor **Ery Nzaramba** performing hand and finger exercises - photographs which in turn were also produced as large-scale posters in the public realm and in galleries.

It might appear remarkable that a contemporary artist working so conceptually simultaneously emphasizes the non-rational. It brings to mind Sol LeWitt's dictum that conceptual artists are mystics, leaping to conclusions that logic cannot reach. Andrew Renton also contends that there is room in Whittlesea's practice for "mystical, sometimes romantic, always subjective elements"<sup>1</sup>. But the Romantic, associated with intense feelings, seems oddly out of place in relation to conceptual art. LeWitt also said that to make art mentally interesting, it had to be emotionally dry, as emotions detract from the experience of the work. However, this incompatibility does not need to be the case. According to German philosopher Jörg Heiser, there are striking parallels between the supposed rationalism of conceptualism, and the acknowledged subjectivism and sentiment of Romanticism. He asserts that the conceptual harkens back to the romantic both in motif, by employing themes such as desire and melancholy, and in method, by the "realization of a sense of disjunction between inevitably fragmentary attempts to describe the world and the infinite world itself"<sup>2</sup>. This awareness of disconnection made representations of unity nearly impossible, and thus resulted in scattered practices, where every fragment was an open-ended attempt to present the ordinary with mystery. In this sense, Whittlesea's *A Breathing Bull* is a physical object, a conceptual gesture, and portal to access an all-encompassing transcendental state. The mental and/or physical interaction with the visitor is hereby crucial and, consequently, the artist must practice humility: "precisely for the sake of saving the



*In the Beginning*  
1961 Projects, Singapore, 2017



imaginative space that Romanticism opens up, Romantic conceptualists circumvent its tendencies to self-obsession, to locating essence in the artist's soul."<sup>3</sup>

Whittlesea's working process could also be seen in a Romantic light. His artistic output consists of multimedia expressions of his research, which he does so thoroughly. As Italian writer Alessandro Baricco describes in *The Barbarians*, acquiring knowledge and meaning through rigorous in-depth scrutiny is a quintessential Romantic ideal, one seemingly lost today in favour of breathing with the gills of Google.<sup>4</sup> It is especially striking that Whittlesea still seems concerned with it then, given the fact that some of his contemporaries, influenced by a generation before them, have spent years hollowing out, cutting off and flattening. Indeed, superficiality became the foremost formal feature of post-modern art.

The ensuing shallowness and simulacra led scholar Fredric Jameson to distinguish a "new depthlessness": not only was there an obsession with the surface itself, the giftwrapping of the present, but "the very idea that there was a behind, a present, had seemingly been abandoned."<sup>5</sup> For Whittlesea this is not the case. Previous works, such as his Yves Klein-inspired project on Judo, point to his profound explorations of the depths of a subject. After four years and a lot of pain, Whittlesea received his black belt in Judo at the Budokwai, one of the oldest martial arts clubs outside of Japan. The controlled and ritualistic game of Judo, of attack and counterattack, is only made possible by intense repetitive practice. *Nagekomi*, or throwing practice, and *Uchikomi*, turning in but ultimately not completing the action, are designed not just to perfect the technique, but "to reach a point at which no conscious thought is required during a fight. The body and mind act as one in a prolonged moment of transcendence."<sup>6</sup> Whittlesea hence not only discovered Judo, but also became increasingly aware he shared the insistence on its spiritual roots with Yves Klein, to a point where it became untenable not to engage with it artistically. The French artist had been a Judo master, having travelled to Japan to study and on his return home opening the Judo Académie de Paris. He also wrote an illustrated book on the fundamentals of Judo which was published in 1959 but never

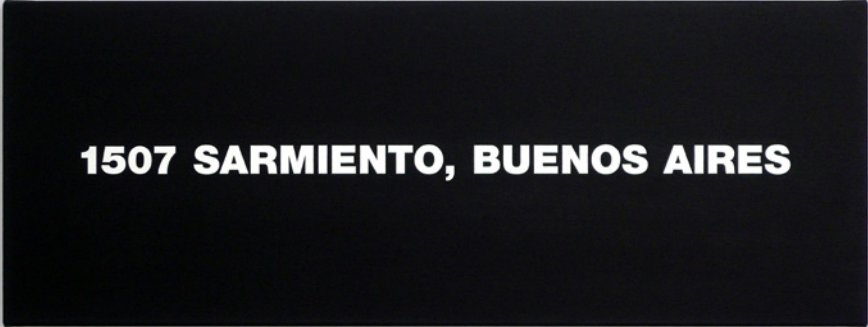


The Demonstration of Gentleness  
HD video, 9 mins 40 secs looped, 2012

translated into English. Whittlesea translated, typeset and printed a "transimile" in 2010 with the Everyday Press, stating that "in some ways learning judo was a demonstration of sincerity in response to the text. It gave me not just the knowledge to translate the book but the authority as well. (...) It just wouldn't have been possible if I'd been seen as an outsider."<sup>7</sup>

Even before his endeavours in judo, Whittlesea showed a penchant for exhaustive, near-ritualistic repetition. In his series of Studio Paintings, begun in 1995 and still ongoing, he applies himself to repeat a thousand tiny brushstrokes, painting white letters on a dark background. He has said of their making that "the control of hand and of brush, and of body and of breath, became a meditation"<sup>8</sup>, in a similar fashion to On Kawara losing himself whilst painting. For it was Kawara's technique, and perhaps especially the devotion that allowed Kawara to transcend himself in the act of painting by worshipping its structures and gestures, which Whittlesea appropriated. But where Kawara's works of art are imbued with an existential sensibility, the Studio Paintings have a different conceptual significance. They emphasise Whittlesea's engagement with art history, referencing the studio addresses of various artists in terms of content and Kawara in terms of method. Additionally, the works proved to be an important step for Whittlesea to evade representation, because "as you paint a letter you aren't representing that letter, you are making the thing itself. It isn't a picture of the word: it is the word."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is in the very physicality of the paintings that concepts find a way to materialize. The idea of the studio, of the most intimate place of creation, is given a presence wherever the painting is shown. It has an immediate impact upon encountering it, as a single painting can occupy an entire room and transport the viewer, however briefly, to somewhere else. After these hard to explain initial moments, it is for the viewer to imagine, to mentally produce an image or atmosphere of the studio in the exhibition space, of the there in the here, of the past in the now.

For finally there is nothing to spectate.  
It is but a concept they articulate.



**1507 SARMIENTO, BUENOS AIRES**

Studio Painting - Marcel Duchamp  
Acrylic on canvas, 2012

## NOTES ON THE TEXT

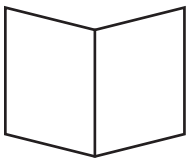
- 1 WHITTLESEA, Ian, "Before the Imagination Can Take Hold: Conversation with Coline Milliard and Andrew Renton", Exhibition Catalogue 'Becoming Invisible', Marlborough Contemporary, March 2013
- 2 HEISEN, Jörg, "Moscow, Romantic, Conceptualism and After", e-flux Journal, issue 29, November 2011
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 BARICCO, Alessandro, De Barbaren, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2013
- 5 VERMEIJEN, Timotheus, "The New "Depthiness""", e-flux Journal, issue 61, January 2015
- 6 WHITTLESEA, Ian, "Commitment", in: BLAUMEY, David, Specialism, Occasional Table 1 Open Editions, London, 2016
- 7 WHITTLESEA, Ian, "Before the Imagination Can Take Hold: Conversation with Coline Milliard and Andrew Renton", Exhibition Catalogue 'Becoming Invisible', Marlborough Contemporary, March 2013
- 8 WHITTLESEA, Ian, "Commitment", in: BLAUMEY, David, Specialism, Occasional Table 1 Open Editions, London, 2016
- 9 WHITTLESEA, Ian, "Before the Imagination Can Take Hold: Conversation with Coline Milliard and Andrew Renton", Exhibition Catalogue 'Becoming Invisible', Marlborough Contemporary, March 2013

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This booklet is set in Sol Sans, a typeface designed by Ian Whittlesea for Progress Through Typography, London in 2010. Sol Sans is based on Sol LeWitt's handwritten Sentences on Conceptual Art first Published in 09, New York in 1969. Any letters not used in LeWitt's original text have been replaced by Helvetica Medium.

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