

Performance Script: JULY 7, 2011

Enter the gallery and move slowly. Make your feet heavy and precise, like the choreography is just to walk. Be moving as if you've decided you are not lost.

You are to only look for the piece "Newspaper"--nothing else should catch your eye, except in registering it is not "Newspaper." On your approach walk the perimeters of gallery rooms like you are going through a body after being accidentally swallowed. As if you've gotten involved too fast and are now numb. Your vision to the work on the walls has blurred. Keep eye contact with the people following you and the people flowing through the museum, from both directions, they are a mixed current, but not rapids.

You have nothing to hide from the guards. It is unclear what it means to notice you, for you to be suspicious. Try not to attract attention--this is a personal journey, so don't be discouraged by being ignored, either. At any moment that you see a camera, stop, and do a mental tally, one where you'll lose track, and the number will become an idea. A head count is only for the present.

You feel these stranger's potential photos. They are your responsibility. If the opportunity presents itself, sustain a pose of gazing at a person with a camera while they are photographing. The person photographing probably will not see you staring. The camera will make you invisible while they are absorbed in getting a good angle.

You have arrived when you see several stacks of newspapers wrapped in twine placed in tiers. Put one foot at each opening of the stacks. Practice getting too close, bending down, being vulnerable. Make your ass go in the air: if someone kicked you, you would lose your balance. Clean "Newspapers" off with puffs of air to remove the dust. This is not yoga. Make your body something you'll fix later. Read upside down. Try to see your own shadow as you lean. Try to read everything, as if it is one: articles and advertisements. Be literal with what all the combinations mean. You can kneel down, in that pose, to make the "Newspapers" like a grave.

As if drying off from a swim, stand guard to the piece. Appear as though you could be protecting them. Wait for the papers to talk to you. Treat the "Newspapers" as you would a walky-talky, complete with bursts of air fuzz that you will have to process as relevant and irrelevant.

Enter a wavelength that is not the time of day or space of the museum but the twenty years between now and when these fake papers were made. You may appear as though you are waiting for someone to arrive at the newspapers to sustain the discomfort of being alone. Take the friend's advice who suggests you write a letter to the artist and read that letter to the group awaiting your talk at "Newspapers."

Dear Robert Gober:

There is a psychic connection between your fake newspapers and the relatively recent flurry of people taking pictures in museums. To visit a museum is something to report on, or to make available to see, for that unknown audience of memory. The impulse seems linked to imitating a newspaper spread. When I see someone posing next to a piece of art, or, their bodies just in front of it, not inside the photo, I see that picture getting discarded. I don't know how it is that when people are taking so many pictures I still feel that pictures don't exist.

I thought about staging performers to be photographing in the galleries leading up to your piece. But I cringe at even directing someone to take a picture. I think I need to be directing people in not taking a picture. But are these opposites? [he's shooting video]. The planted photographers would look attached to me, they would probably have been my friends, and I realized I wouldn't want to be attached to fake photographers. Like, if I was dating and everyone was a photographer, the fake photographer would not be my type. I would rather imagine staring at people photographing. Cameras, at least deactivated on the bodies of people in the museum, happen frequently enough that I wouldn't have to stage it. And anyway, I still have my whole life to watch people take pictures.

I don't blame people for photographing; I don't know if they can help it. Vilem Flusser writes in his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*:

Cameras demand that their owners (the ones who are hooked on them) keep on taking snaps, that they produce more and more redundant images. This photo-mania involving the eternal recurrence of the same (or of something very similar) leads eventually to the point where people taking snaps feel they have gone blind...They are not 'in charge of' taking photographs, they are consumed by the greed of their camera, they have become an extension to the button of their camera...A permanent flow of unconsciously created images is the result.

Officially allowing photography was a watershed decision before the 2007 Frieda Kahlo show in this museum. At the information desk I learn that this coincided with the increasing technology of cell phone cameras. Guards couldn't tell the difference between when people were taking notes on their phone and taking a picture. Meanwhile, visitors were actually complaining they *couldn't* take pictures in the museum, maybe because it was like a violation to their personal experience, like a threat to their memory. The leading defense was, if the museum could sell reproductions of a piece, why couldn't visitors pose next to it, for their noncommercial uses? Not allowing photography got linked with the sinister motive to capitalize off a restricted picture only being accessible through a postcard, a book, or a t-shirt. What became clear in this struggle for the right to photograph in a museum is how it is the *taking* of a photo that offers the intended memory. This is a transfer or a gestural reinforcement from something you could hold. It's like multiple lenders. The photo is an event.

When I went to a talk the other night, the announcements began with saying you cannot take people's pictures without the express permission of the person being photographed. I wonder how often people might ask a painting, a sculpture, a photograph permission, and how this might seem crazy. Then the next night, I was sitting in the audience at a cabaret style performance and all I could see was the screen of the person in front of me taking photos of the burlesque act. This could have been the friend of the performer, they could have had permission, but I suspected it was the free reign technique.

I have stood guard at "Newspapers," communicating with it so to speak, which deters, but also attracts visitors because they think I am a docent. Someone even asked me if I was the artist. They were joking. I ended up talking about how "Newspapers" is really a performance of negligence. And I'm not trying to say people don't look at art, because that wouldn't be fair, you are here because you care about art. People come here to look at art, right?

I'm just curious about what discourages "Newspapers" from being looked at. I've been watching how most people don't read the surface of these stacks, and how what you would read feels a little bit like a puzzle to solve. Stopping to solve a puzzle doesn't go with conveyer belt flow of moving through galleries, even if it is easy, like a travel size puzzle sold in a toy store, one that loses its pieces in between car seats. Also, "Newspapers" is one of the only pieces on the

ground in this permanent collection exhibition, and its bunched like waste, good-looking garbage, but still associated with what is ready to be brought to the people who sell trash.

Reading the wall text, I see it's on archival paper, that they are constructed to be *like* newspapers, but ones that don't yellow. When my eyes jump over the twine, I see the headlines are twisted, combined, and selected. "Protestor thrusts a fetus at Clinton," "Student killed after objecting to racial slur," "Bush is sent forth as Champion of family Values," "Judge Dismisses Case Against Men Holding Hands," "Vatican condones discrimination against homosexuals." What that means is the Vatican intended to scrutinize laws intended to protect gays and to oppose them if they promote public acceptance of gay behavior. When I search the New York Times archive I find they have changed homosexual to gay in the headline, but not in the text's body.

It's not a subtle world you've created at all, once you bend over. Weddings look absurd, all the pots, and rings, and dresses: the gift is presented as a road sign, like an attraction up against this hit parade of who gets a shit taken on them.

I also have stood at other sides of this gallery to watch people interact with "Newspapers." It's very uncomfortable to stand still in a gallery longer than a few minutes without a uniform saying my job is to stand here, which is perhaps emblematic of how uncomfortable it is to be an artist, with the rare occasion of time, to do their work. It's weird to come do my work inside a museum; I am even more aware

of the ambient social doubt that a non-canonized, person making art is necessary. So the discomfort is really suspicion. Anyway, if I circled the gallery, and the new people coming in did not know that I was on a loop, that would be maybe less uncomfortable. The incognito artist is, in other words, just a performance artist.

What also feels uncomfortable is listening to people turning on their cameras, the path of beeps to turn a flash off make cameras like portable video games. It's strange, the limitations on behavior. How just saying no flash, or not on this floor but on those floors, is a reminder of this limp control. Photography has become akin with a sort of lawlessness--it's like the power you might feel when jaywalking. I wonder if there is, a connection with outdated laws, or the reality of living gay verses the laws about being gay, and how someone photographing, might be exerting this strong desire, one they cannot help, and don't think is wrong. This isn't a comparison, but a sort of collision between your piece and the photographic acts.

Anyway, I am writing to let you know that no one really photographs these "Newspapers." I've been visiting your piece for about a month now, once a week, sometimes more, depending how lost I am about what to say, and I've seen no one photograph it. It's in the corner of a room, the middle of the second floor, so those factors might lend to a moment of fatigue. The location of your piece is similar to hitting the goeey bottom of a body of water.

Also, "Newspapers" is right next to René Magritte's painting of a comb, Ibuprofen, a bed, a feather, and clouds as wallpaper, to indicate a dream. "Personal Values" is the title, which goes nicely with the singeing "family values" codeword in one of your Newspapers headlines. In fact, that's the only curatorial logic I can detect here. To say "Newspaper" is next to a surrealist painting is a way of saying that your piece is often treated in the periphery. Because surrealism, you know, is famous, recognizable, comforting, explanations of the movement make it to high school curriculums.

I don't think this twisted reality of you being the model for a Saks Fifth Avenue wedding dress is a 1992 version of dream state surrealism. It's just a prize coined by a hidden layer, for curators, friends, historians, people who bought the audio tour, for artists. It's an act of withheld information, something akin to a hunt. In all the writing about your work, the "Newspaper" pieces are mentioned the least, maintaining that same periphery the general population of SFMOMA exerts on to it. "Newspapers" is therefore a very successful insistence on what it means to be overlooked. However public a newspaper might be, on a stand, or a screen, reading the news is an intensely personal process. You might as well be getting yourself in the news if you are making fake newspapers, right? Your face is the imaged bride, on the page with the news, as a testament to this. It's like a where's Gober when you didn't know you were being given a where's Gober.

Only recently I began to understand the desire to be taking pictures in a museum. I had given an assignment of going to this museum and writing about a piece of art, interpreting it. Somehow the assignment that I modified from another teacher had this requirement to take a photo of the thing students would write about, and I didn't take that requirement out. It was an oversight, or an experiment. I'm not sure which. Anyway, I was helping two students with editing drafts of their essays, and one of them began to reminisce about the first time he saw a Salvador Dali painting at this museum. How that was a really special experience for him because he grew up on the reproductions. His classmate asked, did you take a picture of it? I seized on this question with inexhaustible fascination. My brain was on fire.

Why take a picture of a painting? His explanation took some detours. He had to go to Las Vegas for his sister's wedding. There was a Manet or Van Gough show there, I don't remember which. He expressed his need to see this show, and this strong desire was also an announcement to his family of being an artist. This show felt like the opportunity to meet a celebrity, one that you could stare at and they wouldn't flinch or blink. Objects can be celebrities. The weekend was too busy with ceremony for him to go. He felt deeply deprived and disappointed.

His answer to my persistent question, can it still be a sacred experience without taking a picture, was, I take pictures of everything, everything interesting. To prove this, he scrolled through the photos in his phone. He

showed me a photo that I had even showed him, taken from the computer screen I had wheeled into class one day. Actually that photo was of the Vija Celmins drawing right near your "Newspapers" piece that looks like a photo but when you get up close you see it's a very meticulous graphite drawing. He keeps this picture to make conversation, to ask his friends to guess if it's a photo **or** a drawing, and everyone says photo, and then he says no! It's a drawing!

Why am I so confused about people taking photos--why do I care, right, how does it hurt me? What is difficult for me is to reconfigure *my* relationship to the camera. I don't see a camera as something that can help me see someone else's art better, or for extended or injected time. Or maybe this is my issue with this never-ending conflict, or subsidiary framework, where photography often becomes this bland tool for painting unless it imitates the bigness of painting. It's some history hang over. I mean, I have no problem documenting art with photography--art that needs documentation that is. And ultimately everything needs a reproduction. So the question might be about when we start employing ourselves to be the reproducers.

My relationship to a camera is not about saving the first time I see something. It is more about the continual times I see something, or the impossibility for there be a precious moment, just a painfully ordinary one. Or entering a place of delay and darkness. To me photography is just an accumulation; it's versions of people accumulating. Or

photography has almost completely shifted for me from mechanical tools to word tools, and that I continue to argue with that idea also.

Anyway, we are at a battleground of what gets called mundane or not. I cannot avoid it here, love and death. I am standing in front of your work, Robert Gober, and people are watching me. They are listening. The museum has hired me to give a talk here. It's part of a live influx of writers to coincide with the Gertrude Stein Family collection show upstairs. The Stein show costs more money at the door, so the permanent collection feels like a discount. Upstairs, the paintings are shipped from Europe, displayed behind glass, a type of glass you can see your own reflection in if you try to see the texture of the paint. They have extra guards in that show, and photography is absolutely *not* allowed. But that doesn't mean people haven't been taking pictures.

I went to see the Gertrude Stein PBS style biography show across the street, at the Jewish Museum. It leaves out readings of her work, practically denigrating her more experimental works as *unreadable* because it decidedly focuses on the visual Gertrude, the surface. I found the Félix González-Torrez photo of Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein's grave under the subject heading of "legacy" in the show. I heard the curator talk about this photo, saying it's cross gendered queer bonding, creating ties to the past, creating hope for the future, whatever that means. Talk about utopia can be such a bummer sometimes.

I've been thinking a lot about subtlety these days. About how in June all the alternative spaces' art shows have queer in the title and clap their hands, literally, holding applause signs, promoting the work of who is going to say this is queer. And it seems to be the only place for art made by queers this month, the megaphone.

Anyway, the photo of what is maybe Stein and Toklas' grave or maybe is just a camera pointing at flowers, is "Untitled." González-Torrez subtitles the "grave" giving an estimate of its location in place, name. There is a concept neatly delivered, or the piece readily contextualized. So it *isn't* untitled, that's sort of a joke. Meanwhile, your "Newspapers," aren't *really* newspapers, so there's the joke. The hope, maybe I should say. You title them "Newspaper," single, but I've actually been re-titling your piece in the plural, just to make my sentences sound better.

On the wall intersecting to the left of the grave photo is a Tammy Rae Carland photo of Félix González-Torrez's grave. It's basically a replica, with different color flowers. I don't know if he was even buried in Oakland. Referent on referent--like phyllo uncooked. I had to iterate my attachment to these pictures by standing longer than I did in front of anything else; they sort of cradled me. Maybe it was the corner.

I had seen the Stein Toklas grave photo before, but only as a slide in a lecture, on an old type of projector, one that shuts you up in a room in the dark and hums. Then I had seen it in books. Instead of taking a photograph of this picture, to commemorate my first time seeing it, I composed a text message, saying right now I stand in front of the González-Torrez grave picture that I know is one of your favorite pictures. I sent the message to the person who showed me grave photo for the first time, when I was listening to her lecture.

ARIEL GOLDBERG 2011 For the Occasion of SFMOMA's Pop Up Poets series.

I think about newspapers as inescapably reproductions, emanating a disavowal of the real thing. What could we demand, with the situation of someone looking at a photo under the condition it is not a flat thing? "Newspapers" might as well be a grave. It makes me think about the right to determine graves, where they are, if the experience of mourning is so displaced over time. And how much grief is stored up in photos, waiting for us, like an invitation. What is a grave in a time when deaths are unacknowledged? Can newspapers be a grave? Can a reproduced portrait of David Wojnarowicz be another grave, and for who, for the artist who died of AIDS or all the not so famous people? Fake Newspapers are a kind of exhumed gravestone, one that sunk underground because it's made of the vulnerable. The "Newspapers" are a lot less pretty than framed flowers; unless you have a newspaper fetish, which I kind of do, because it's my only sense of home.