

**Unlim-
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UNLIMITED SHELF LIFE: THE POTENTIAL OF SELF DESTRUCTION

The words of W.S. Merwin from his conversation with Michael Silverblatt keep surfacing in my mind when I go through the image collection we've built up over the course of our conversation: "*The imaginative strength of an institution can be measured by its ability to hold within itself, in balance, the seeds of its own destruction. ... If it cannot do that, its days are numbered*" When an institution looks inwards to think about its direction, it is faced with insecurities and possibilities, affected or steered by all kinds of things; material circumstances and time. Given its stated purpose, our institution tries to be a platform for a wide array of projects. It holds a collection. It documents a history that it strove to protect from the depths of forgetfulness and disregard. It itself became a piece of history in the process. As artist-run institutions sometimes are, it is caught in a cycle of hyper-productivity, low resources in an epoch of financial crisis and its beloved austerity, a marathon runner with broke sponsors. The situation has prompted me to think about changes and how they occur, and, what kind of changes we want, and when. As opposed to proposing a plan of concrete alterations in our activities: how to handle correspondence, whether to pick up phones or not, whether to slow the actual functions of the museum down to actually correspond with the little resources it has, being blunt about the financial situation and not trying to do more than actually possible or how many exhibitions to include in the annual program, whether to give the whole year to a single artist and have that entity – whatever it is – have free reign for a year, realizing different variations of a theme, artists working in overlapping periods, creating an open space between exhibitions where some form of collaboration between the two or more people, groups, whatever it is, or basing everything on a theme for the year and working with two people to explore the subject, with all the possibilities, and also the possibilities of constructing the longest sentences that Word 2012 has the capacity to handle without making the entire text underscored with green alarm lines, one wonders if changes already exist before they occur. (Insert green lines). Embracing impermanence is the imaginative strength of this place. It needs to pay attention to its self-destructive potential. That is here already and has long been. It is a theme already, and it will generate changes. It makes me think of some changes that I've recently thought about. You came into this with a shovel in your hand.

SURVEYING FOR CHANGES

You were telling me about impermanence and how it could be a central focus of the museum's program. I agree that it seems like a useful notion to carry when you are thinking about what a Museum *should do*, or *could be*. You mentioned that the museum members have been talking about whether it should continue its operations as is, or whether it might be a good time to implement some type of radical change, in its program or how it deals with its role. Here is my own forecast - that beginning with the idea of impermanence will allow the conversation to be less about legacy, and more about possibilities; less about expectations and obligations, and more about experimentation and the inevitable excitement and failures which come with this. Embracing impermanence will allow for traditions that have long existed to collapse. Perhaps you will find that they are important traditions, and should be re-instituted and rebuilt exactly as they were, but there is a chance you will find, once they are gone, that no one misses them at all.

And yet, despite how easy it is for me to advise you to *welcome impermanence*, to *declare impermanence* as an inevitable and natural state of events, I do acknowledge how hard it is to describe or identify those moments that signal the shifts and changes that impermanence implies. It is hard to catch the moment in which stasis starts to shift and flow; to note which particular episodes sweep change through. However I think the ability to expect and record change is closely aligned with the ability to invite and declare the need for change. Nicholson Baker chronicles such a shift in "Changes of Mind", in which he uses an analysis of changing social knowledge; "one sees a dogma and its vocabulary seeping from discipline to discipline, from class to class", to illuminate the complexities of how his own mind moves towards new conclusions.

When I'm at the laundromat, trying to reconstitute for myself the collaboration of influences, disgusts, mistakes, and passions that swept me towards a simple change of heart about forklifts, the variables press in, description stammers and drowns in detail, and imagination hops up and down on one shoe to little purpose.¹

¹ Nicholson Baker, "Change of Mind", *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber*, New York, Vintage Books, 1997, p. ...



GREENHOUSE

In a backyard in Dessau, formerly home to the Bauhaus, stands a greenhouse. Its materials came from the post-war rubble of the facade of the school's main building.



After coming to celebrate the complexity of the process of his own change of mind he calls for this nuanced process to be embraced. Rather than the “squint away of specificity” which leads to tales of change being packaged into narratives that advance the notion of a smooth and inevitable monolithic sweep of progress, Baker states that he would like to see “each sequential change of mind in its true, knotted, clotted, whiny multifariousness, with all of the colourful streamers of intelligence still taped on and flapping in the wind.”²

Greenhouse in Dessau, photograph of a museum display at the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau.
Author of original photograph unknown.

2 Ibid, p.



GROPIUS

The Haus Gropius stood at the front of a row of buildings designed by him as the residences for the professors, *masters*, of the Bauhaus. Its white edges contrasted the trees in the surrounding gardens. The conservative buildings across the street still manage to have a dreary heaviness to them, and their boring metallic shutters give you - well at least me if not the generic "you" - a feeling that something terrible is about to happen everywhere, all the time, and that you, generically and specifically, should be inside when this general "it" happens. Having been damaged by bombs in 1943, the Gropius house did not get rebuilt despite the enthusiasm of a local man, Mr Emmer, to do so in the 1950s. Eventually, Emmer was permitted to build on the existing foundation.

However, he was not not to re-construct the previous building. Instead, as I understand it, he could build upon whatever part of the original structure that was still salvagable, the scale of which appears undetermined.

A conventional single family home arose in the former's place. A structural and aesthetic bastard, somewhat reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel's forest dungeon - sans candy canes and gingerbread - in the row of the other luxurious Meisterhäuser, who would soon find themselves dressed in new materials. The Emmer house was recently demolished and the ruins of the two buildings were briefly united before giving way to a new structure, I think it is based on Gropius's design.



DECLARING BOUNDARIES

Did I ever tell you about the Elysian Park Museum of Art? It was a project that played with the role institutional structures can play in inviting and cataloguing *impermanence*. Elysian Park is a site of constantly fluctuating uses. People use the park for all kinds of typical park things, walking, walking dogs, playing tennis and soccer. And yet the public space of the park is also used in ways that, as someone coming from New Zealand but living in Los Angeles, I had never seen before; it is common for children's birthday parties to be held in the park, and in such cases matching table cloths are draped over concrete picnic tables and decorations strung between trees. Sometimes small fences are even erected to distinguish the temporary celebration space of one group from the rest of the park. Tropes that I associate with domesticity are laid over the public infrastructure of the space. In a similar way, during weekends it is not uncommon to see hammocks strung between trees and people snoozing.



THE SUBURBS

This is how I understood it. In the early 1980s, Wolf Kahlen opened a space, not an institution but an extension of his studio. It continues to be a source of inspiration when it comes to the relationship between an idea and its material form. Ruine der Künste. The building - which became the site of projects concerned with questions of time - had happened on him while out for a walk in the neighborhood of Dahlem in West Berlin. A bombed out suburban villa in the university neighbourhood, a loner among relatives of painted stucco walls and manicured lawns. The house had been destroyed after peace was declared in '45 by victory-delirious soldiers in need for a fast outlet for complex emotions, The ruin became the shell around the whole space. Inside, floorboards ran diagonally with the walls. The inner walls contrast with the broken outside layers, looked at by the likes of myself with a form of bewilderment and lust to see the things that are whole become parts of parts (of parts of parts of parts. To be continued endlessly).



The Elysian Park Museum of Art was a collective project of which I was part. A group of us have met regularly on Sundays in the park for over a year. The process of declaring the park a museum, and creating exhibitions in that space allowed for the monumental and closed structure of a traditional museum to be simultaneously exploited, celebrated and distorted. This was done on purpose by the artists involved and obliquely by all those who continued to use the park on their own terms. For what embraces the impermanence of an institution more than to have a hammock erected in it for a few hours and to have its grounds observed by a visitor swaying in the sun.

The Elysian Park Museum of Art allowed for the terrain of the park to remain functioning, celebrating much needed public space, while also allowing a group of artists to closely consider which of the traditions of admission, display and archiving benefited the viewing of our work, and which constrained it. We asked which of these conventions should be recognized as conservative, in such as they limited the experience of a visiting a "Museum" and in turn negatively contributed to that notion of a Museum which is un-open to the benefits of change.



The Infinite Talk, project by Wojciech Bruszewski, photograph by Wolf Kahlen. (Über Zeit).
Edition Ruine der Künste, West Berlin, 1989.

THE INFINITE TALK

On July 30th 1988 Radio Ruine der Künste came into being. The work of Wojciech Bruszewski broadcasted for 24 hours a day for five years and six months on LW 97.2 and became the world's longest radio program. Bruszewski explained; the world's longest radio program was a philosophical conversation on infinity between two characters, Gary and Paula. The characters and the conversation, however, were generated by a computer. It parsed arguments from a cross-section of the world's philosophical writings, picking arguments at random. Thus despite the fixed amount of knowledge, the accidental encounters between phrases from Plato, Schopenhauer, Chuang Tzu, James, Russell and other renowned philosophers would result in an infinite set of new thoughts. My friend Marek Fr ckowiak wrote the first computer program employed to run the station. A few years later, I wrote a new version of the Infinite Talk. I introduced the acoustic background and corrected the synthesized voice of the two robots. My original plan was for the discourse on infinity to last forever. I even considered the option of converting the radio station to solar energy, in case of some kind of catastrophe destroyed the "Power Plant Civilization". The catastrophe did hit but its name was the German Post Office, which withdrew our radio concession and instead granted it to Radio Brandenburg.

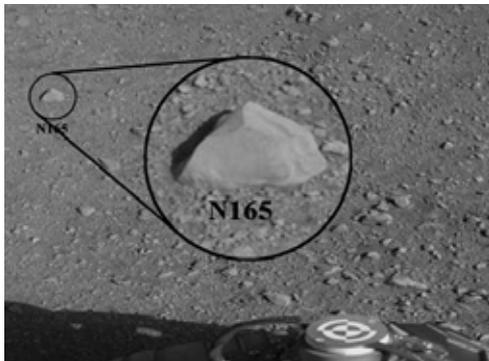
BUILDING ROMANCE

For my part - I'm stuck on this phrase "Shovel Ready Projects".³ It is an idea that appeals to me both in its syntactical bluntness, and its implication that utilitarian - and imaginative - vigour are colliding. The idea, "Shovel Ready Projects", speaks of plans and ideas waiting in the wings, "Shovel Ready Projects" understand the moment before action begins but when the energy required for action is already present. A shovel ready project can exist while there is stasis - exist alongside a "stagnant institution" but if a change is needed, the project will be there, ready, a plan will be waiting. It will be a plan well thought through, it will move the institution in a purposeful - and desired - direction. *The Project, The Plan*, will eliminate scrambling to act just for the sake of change, scrambling without purpose or hope. Scrambling will be eclipsed by clarity.

Relating to the notion of "Shovel Ready Projects" is the concept of having an ideology or political program waiting in the wings, ready to be rolled out. I came across this idea in the work of Naomi Klein. Discussing her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein talks about how economic or social shocks, such as states of war or natural disasters, are taken advantage of as the right moment to implement a radical ideological platform.⁴

³ The term *shovel ready* is a political neologism used to describe a construction project (usually larger-scale infrastructure) where project planning, engineering and funding have advanced to the stage where labourers may immediately be employed to begin work.

⁴ First comes the shock to the country, it can be a military coup, it can be a war, it can be a terrorist attack, but something that makes us very fearful, something that makes us lose the plot, something that makes us look for salvation, and father figures, and after that shock in the window of opportunity comes the economic shock therapy, the extreme country-make-over, so this process as it plays out is what I mean by disaster capitalism - the harnessing of disasters to push through a social and economic re-engineering. I'm not just talking about profiting from disaster by a company like Haliburton, or Blackwater, although I'm talking about that too. I'm talking about something deeper and more sweeping. The harnessing of a crisis in order to push through a sweeping set of policies, that would be impossible to push through under non-crisis circumstances, they need the state of emergency, the state of exception, a democracy free zone, even if this is taking place in the context of a democracy, that only a crisis provides. Is this a quote? Needs reference.



Such platforms are so radical that in any normal circumstances they would be resisted. Klein quotes Milton Friedman saying: “Only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change, when that crisis takes place, the change that occurs depends on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function, to keep the ideas ready until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”⁵

I find it frightening to think that neo-liberal policies with which I disagree might find their way into acceptance through such manipulative tactics. However, I like using Friedman’s notion of “ideas that are lying around” as a way to think through the process of the intellectual evolution of an institution. For positive as well as negative change, I think it is important to keep ideas and hopes active and present. Further, strife for

5 Where from?



ideological change does not necessarily have to be covert, such transformation can be part of an engaged public discussion. Talking about which ideas should become ideals is the beginning of real changes becoming implemented. Ideas that currently seem impossible will have more chance of becoming inevitable if they are brought to the forefront by inclusion in public discourse, from the corridors of the Museum.

And this is where the idea of a “Shovel Ready Romance” comes into play. It is a set of desired actions; a cloud with hopes, congealing into concrete; it is a dream that is ripe for construction.



