

## An Acrobat's Pillow The Strict Art of What's Not There

by Jen Graves

Down low in the museum in a high-ceilinged room with pretty wood floors, the overhead lights have gone a little green. The room is nearly empty. It's the largest in the Henry Art Gallery, built for long vistas and big sculptures that would bust the walls of lesser rooms, but right now, it looks like a school gymnasium put to some nebulous after-hours use. Four enormous rolls of industrial newsprint sit on the floor. Also on the floor: five tightly plastic-wrapped piles of folded white towels, two purple pillows, two light-blue pillows. One wall has two doors. Another wall is studded with three lightbulbs. That's all, and in no way all.

There's a handout with a map at the entrance containing necessary words. About the color-coded pillows, it says, "Pillows that have only been slept on by acrobats" (purple) and "Pillows that have only been slept on by Ornithologists" (light-blue). The piles of plastic-wrapped towels are titled *Anyone*. Their medium is "Bed linen in weekly rotation by a linen service." They sit unopened here, in between uses future and past. How clean are clean towels? The handout is important because it embodies the idea that you must "take the word of" the artist, Jason Dodge; he uses the medium of language to fill in what's there even if you can't see it. The pillows were slept on, and only by acrobats and/or ornithologists. A local hotel does, really, bring new piles of plastic-wrapped towels to the gallery every few days and take the old piles back to be used. The rolls of newsprint are borrowed from the *Seattle Times*, and one by one, over the duration of the art show, each roll will be taken back to the factory to become newspapers, leaving empty spots in the gallery.

Dodge arranged all this by asking acrobats, ornithologists, a local hotel, and the *Seattle Times* to play along. One imagines these conversations were interesting. Another conversation: Dodge arranged for a local farm to bring animals into the Henry for a residency. You won't see them—nobody did, except those directly involved, and no photos were taken. When the animals left, the museum removed their bio-matter (you cannot just have shit sitting out in an art museum), but kept their scuff marks and bits of straw and dirt all across the floor. There's an idyllic, romantic emptiness here, with a certain faint, untraceable scent: one way to represent what happens when artless living creatures get their turn in the frame of art. Museums and galleries can be cold and disappointing places.

Dodge's requirements can be strict: Even a catnap by someone other than the ornithologist—her husband, mistaking one pillow in their bed for another, one imagines—and that pillow is null and void. Are acrobats or ornithologists more likely to dream of flying? These unspoken conversations are part of the art, too, the ones that happened as people were drying themselves off in hotel rooms or drivers were hauling newsprint back toward the factory, or every draft of the stories that appeared in those papers, or the photographs that didn't run but that the photographer wished had. The objects in the galleries are parts of stories shared by the artist, the subject, the sculptor, and you, imagining what's happening the way you might envision your own version of the specific world of any given novel. The future itself assembles, written down in black and white and photographed, rising up on the surfaces of these big blank rolls and going out into ears and mouths and the crawl spaces of new

thoughts. All these spoken and unspoken conversations rise up around the objects in great clouds of narrative.

Dodge calls the newspaper piece *What we have done.*, and that's also the title of the whole museum exhibition: *Jason Dodge: What we have done.* The handout refers to this as "the artist's first comprehensive exhibition in North America." Dodge is American, born in 1969 in Newton, Pennsylvania, now living in Berlin. Comprehensive is a funny word in Dodge world. There are eight pieces here, not including several shown previously in Seattle (at Western Bridge). If *What we have done.* is "comprehensive," it's only in the way that any of Dodge's sculptures is comprehensive—as a complete and specific simple object that cannot be exchanged with any other, but imaginatively unbounded, with so many parts present but unseen, like the way the weight of a head changes the shape of a pillow over time. The phrase *What we have done.* itself is a demonstration of the condition: Styled with a period, it comes across as a finished thought in the past tense, referring to something that already exists, a closed set. But "what we have done" grows every moment, and who could remember all that they've done, and who could know all *we've* done? We don't even know each other.

*What we have done.* has an implied twin phrase, the more common "what have we done." One sounds accomplished, the other despairing. The exhibition is also divided in two: one section containing *The living* (the leavings of the animals), and the other section the pillows, towels, and newsprint rolls. There's a wall between the two sides, with two doors, and each door is actually two doors—you open one to find yourself face-to-face with the back of another door, so each time you go through, the act of going out a door switches you instead into going in one. Furthering the doublemania, the doors turn out to be slightly different sizes, a fact not at first apparent, which results in another mental twinning: what something actually looks like, and what you think it looks like. That paragraph was more fun to write (and, one hopes, to read) than the art was to interact with in the gallery.

There are only two other pieces, made of lightbulbs and a bell. They hang on a wall at the exhibition's midpoint, casting light on both sides. One is two bulbs facing each other very close in, forming a little witticism, a perfect visual phrase. The other is *A signal bell tuned to C inside a wall, marked by lights.* Yes, the bell is really in there. No, you cannot hear it. recommended