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frieze

Always in
the Present



The mayor is sleeping. A pillow that has only been slept on by the mayor of Nuremberg

Dominikus Müller discusses
the role of words and objects in the
work of **Jason Dodge**



“Jason Dodge’ 2012-13, installation view at Kunstverein Nuremberg

It all starts with an object. Lying on the floor of the exhibition space close to the wall, seemingly abandoned by someone who has just left the room, is a bundle of folded cloth, carefully tied up with white string. The coarse fabric, a distinctive marbled grey, looks expensive and hand-woven. Then I read the title: *In Transylvania Zsuzsanna Sipos wove woolen yarn and hemp the colour of a storm at night and the length from the earth to above the weather*. Suddenly, I see this object differently.

In Transylvania... perfectly embodies Jason Dodge’s work of the past decade: ready-mades or specifically commissioned quotidian objects, whose titles give them an added dimension. The way titles and additional information frame our experience of the objects we see matters a great deal to Dodge. He recently decided to stop providing dates for his works (although earlier work may still appear with dates in existing writing in print or online), ‘In my mind,’ Dodge explained to me, ‘the nature of things is that they are always in the present.’¹

So, while looking at this bundle of fabric, I start thinking about the weaver who made it, a woman named Zsuzsanna Sipos, who apparently lives in the remote Romanian region of Transylvania - a place I have never been to and will probably never visit. I imagine the amazement she must have felt at being assigned such a curious task by a Berlin-based artist: to weave a piece of fabric using yarn the colour of a night storm long enough to reach from the ground to ‘above the weather’, where no clouds ever hide the sun. I contemplate the logistics behind creating such an item and, gradually, this simple piece of fabric expands to bridge multiple distances - night and day, storm and sun, Transylvania, Berlin and the Kunstverein Nuremberg, where this work was on show in 2013. All of these places are real, but right now they exist only in my imagination: a profusion of associations erupting from a small bundle of cloth.

Despite the literalness of Dodge’s titles, it’s easy to get carried away with language when looking at his work: expressive metaphors come naturally; melancholy and longing take over. The artist’s spare, highly effective pairings of objects and titles, of things with words, form a precisely assembled machine of meaning—or, at the risk of sounding pretentious, a dense text-object-haiku—minimal in its means, but maximal in effect.

Over the last decade, Dodge has created a body of work that appears and re-appears in various forms in multiple exhibition contexts, like a meandering score with recurring motifs or, rather, an alphabet that can be used to form new words and sentences in each different scenario. Another example: simple copper pipes, seemingly connected to the building’s water supply, run through the gallery, prompting the unsettling sensation that the space could be flooded by a simple turn of a tap. The title: *Your death, sub-marine. copper pipes connected to water*. Apparently, the pipes might even

contain hemlock. The same is true for various wind instruments, such as *Poison hemlock in a tenor flute*. The contents or other works, however, are more auspicious: some unnervingly silent ‘sleeping’ owls, lying on battered cartons in the corners of the exhibition room, have gemstones hidden in them by a taxidermist (*Rubies inside of an owl* and *Emeralds inside of an owl*).

At other times, Dodge offers us almost nothing at all: small gestures, ephemeral residues, not so much the presence of an object but its absence. In such works, the notion of possibility looms large. For his 2012-13 exhibition at Kunstverein Nuremberg, the artist simply removed a radiator (*The disappearance of Katherine Bissell*). Likewise, in Dodge’s first institutional show in the US, ‘What We Have Done’ (2013-14), at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, he presented *The living*, a room with nothing in it except a few traces of dirt and hay, and a faintly lingering animal smell. ‘Without an audience, several animals were brought into a room for some time and then returned to where they live,’ reads the description in the show’s catalogue. Yet, in viewing these works, we are made aware only that something appears to have been removed from the space: our common sense must help us to decipher what has taken place.

For his permanent installation at the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia, Dodge installed a simple cedarwood double door, in the tower of a former power plant adjacent to the collection’s premises. Up in the tower, he simply left open a window (*A permanently open window*). Included in the Kunstverein Nuremberg show, *two doors* consists of a similar wooden double door built into an existing door frame. ‘For me, a work has to function as a membrane or a threshold,’ says Dodge. ‘You come through it and are somewhere else.’² Open windows and doors seem perfectly to encapsulate this notion.

Many of Dodge’s works have a touch of the uncanny about them, in Sigmund Freud’s sense of *Unheimlichkeit*, which literally translates as ‘the becoming strange of one’s own home’, implying the establishing of a sense of distance between ourselves and our immediate surroundings. Likewise, Dodge estranges the viewer from the object, alienating the familiar and everyday by claiming, for instance, that there is poison inside a copper pipe. The uncanny is not something supernatural or ghostly, he suggests: it is the world and everything in it—objects, people, animals.

‘There is a distance between the camera on the lid of my laptop and your face on the screen,’ Dodge wrote in the exhibition catalogue for ‘What we have done.’ ‘We look away from each other’s eyes by enough of a fraction that we know we are in another space, one flat and one round—one on one side of the earth and the other not. I keep imagining that this distance of about 15cm is one of the most important measures because it keeps us from looking into each other’s eyes, and therefore keeps us from suspending our disbelief.’³ Distance, Dodge suggests, is closely linked to seeing, in as much as it is a necessary precondition for being able to see anything at all. The artist invokes distance in his work, rendering it somehow visible, only to then ask for ways to bridge the gap. Seeing, in Dodge’s understanding, has long ‘become something that is internal and external, distant and close. Now, we can’t think of seeing in terms of getting the information only through “looking” at something.’⁴ Instead, when talking about what seeing means, context should also be taken into account. While he might play on the poetic and the imaginary, Dodge’s impulse is not escapism; rather, he seeks to draw our attention back to that which is right in front of our eyes.



Changing the lights. From rose light to white light, from white light to rose light, by hand, over and over

Recently, Dodge took his interest in language and poetry to another level: in addition to giving lectures, he founded the publishing press Fivehundred places to issue small poetry monographs by the likes of Matthew Dickman, Anna McDonald or Mary Ruefle. At the same time, Dodge's work increasingly explores the logistics of the everyday, disassociating objects from their usual applications and making use of daily routines. *Changing the Lights. From rose light to white light, from white light to rose light by hand over and over*—on view in his solo show 'We Are the Meeting' at Casey Kaplan, New York earlier this year—consisted of a ladder and stack of white and rose-coloured fluorescent lights that were changed throughout the course of the exhibition. A work like *What we have done*—presented in the eponymous exhibition—draws directly on our communicational infrastructure: during the course of the show, huge rolls of paper on display in the gallery were transported back, one at a time, to the printers they had been borrowed from in order for that day's edition of *The Seattle Times* to be printed. A similar interest in publishing and distribution to that which motivates Fivehundred places is at stake here—albeit in a more abstract manner. Also on view in the same show was *Anyone*, described in the accompanying exhibition catalogue as consisting of 'sheets from a hotel linen service, replaced weekly'. Unlike with the artist's earlier works, meaning here is not ascribed to the objects by what has already happened to them (as denoted by their titles); instead, these pieces are placeholders, arrested in time, part of the infinite circulation of things—here, there, gone again.

We have long accepted the dense global network of logistics and communication as given. Things and people circulate around the world. Just this morning, I talked to a friend in Mexico City via Skype, using a device that was 'designed in California' and 'assembled in China'; I sat in my kitchen in Berlin and poured milk into my coffee that had come all the way from the small alpine village of Berchtesgaden on the Austrian border; at noon, I read about an exhibition that took place in London in a magazine printed in Italy; and, in the evening, I ate a steak that had been shipped to Germany from Argentina. We may rarely spare a thought for the provenance of the items we consume, but it's all there on the packaging for us to see. Suddenly, a blanket woven by a woman in Transylvania using yarn and hemp the colour of a storm at night feels completely normal.



Rubies inside of an Owl

1. Email conversation with the artist, 7 May 2014
2. Interview with the artist, Berlin, 15 April 2014
3. Jason Dodge: What We Have Done, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 2013, unpaginated
4. Interview with the artist, Berlin, 15 April 2014

Jason Dodge is based in Berlin, Germany. He has had recent solo exhibitions at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, USA and Casey Kaplan, New York, USA. Forthcoming shows include: Galleria Franco Noero, Turin, Italy; Centre d'édition contemporaine, Geneva, Switzerland; and Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, France.

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