

ASS  
BACKWARDS  
TEXT FIRST<sup>1</sup>

HALLIE MCNEILL



<sup>1</sup>"The professionalization of artistic practice, with its emphasis on artists' statements and the academic blitzkrieg of the crit, has bound the act of making with that of describing, so that many works of contemporary art seem to enter the world backwards, text-first." Ben Street, "Bad Language," *Big Red and Shiny*, vol. 1, issue 2 (October 15, 2012).

## Imaginons l'inimaginable

People love to write about what is lost, even more so that what is not lost. At its simplest, the writing process always implies this: a thought arises in the writer's head, and, before dissipating into the ethereal, it is inscribed, caught and captured in the net of words and rendered communicable.

In this determinative instance of creative production, the writer cancels out his individuality, and by negating himself and leaving his mark - the singularity of his absence - the work comes forth to stand on its own.

The text-object is born.

That which would be lost, or, more generally, that which would be, is thus saved by the surrogate of the text, so much so that the text becomes more than a mere stand-in: it is that which would be, and in this sense, that which would be comes to be through the text-object. The text-object, in other words, becomes the closest material embodiment of something that would not have been otherwise. It is the most tangible form of the lost, of that which is not, that which would have been, could have been; the text-object is the not-created.

It is lost potential reconstituted.

And yet, why do we care? Is it because this lost potential of the not-created - having fallen through the cracks of creative production - taunts us with the cruelest jeers of that which could have been? Is it because, at the far antipodes of what we have (what is, our "here"), it is what we do not have (the unattainable "there")? Because it alludes to that which we will never see, that which we will never know, that which we will never realize or experience?

In the work of the artist Hallie McNeill, there is neither “here” nor “there.” There is nothing to be memorialized as not there, nor is there anything to behold. Toying with the lost potential of the uncreated object, her work – sculptural in nature despite the ephemerality of her materials and their frequent lack of dimensionality – represents a shift from the idea of what an art object should be.

By elucidating the specificity of artistic research practice and the conditions of its possibility, rather than again and again spelling out the dialectics (or synthesis) of ‘art’ from the art-object to the mere object, thereby questioning the most essential forms themselves, and, moreover, their implications. Their documentation, whether photographic or textual, becomes essential to the iteration of the work itself. Like the text-object, the secondary components of her work become a means of reconstituting that which is not in her work.

In her most recent series *Untitled A to Z*, the very nature of the pieces – so contingent upon their diminished multiplicity, that is to say, their non-existence as objects – attests to the inevitability of their life-cycle from their very creation. Even at first glance, their quotidian materials do nothing to disguise the allusions to non-existence. Looking at them, we see the object before us (that which there is, the “here”) as an indexical sign pointing to what we do not have. As such, we become reliant upon other forms of documentation – written text, for example – to offer us what we cannot acquire through her objects, to fill in for the understood emptiness of stylistic tropes. In this way her pieces beg the viewer or reader to consider their significance without consideration of the burden of the object. As insubstantial as faint marks on a page, McNeill’s humble objects ask to fall through the cracks and to remain there, their lost potential untapped and lying fallow. It is not that they wish to tease us with what they could have been, it is simply that they do not wish for us to behold them anymore than they wish us to be beholden to them.

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