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“What Do You Do?”

Martine Syms & Marco Kane Braunschweiler

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## “What Do You Do?”

This document is part of a larger series of PDFs organized and published by Bodega on the occasion of *First Among Equals*, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia that considers the various modes contemporary artists have developed to work with their peers. Contributors to the series offer various perspectives on the social, political, and economic relationships that inform contemporary artistic practice. All PDFs from this series are available at [bodegaphiladelphia.org](http://bodegaphiladelphia.org).

Martine Syms is a conceptual entrepreneur based in Los Angeles, California. Marco Kane Braunschweiler is an artist and organizer who has exhibited, lectured, and presented programs on design, art, and business throughout the US. From 2007-2011 Syms and Braunschweiler directed Golden Age, a non-commercial project space dedicated to sharing ideas through exhibitions, performances and printed matter.

I. A LIST OF PROJECTS FROM GOLDEN AGE

2011

Lauren Anderson, Robin Cameron and Paul Stoelting, Paul Theobald and Company  
NY Art Book Fair, MOMA PS1  
David Robbins, Concrete Comedy Reading + Book Signing  
David Hartt, Belvedere  
James Goggin, Pop Culture Colour Theory  
Echo Park Film Center Filmmobile Workshop and Screening  
Golden Age, Reference Work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
Kaugummi Books and Felicia Atkinson, Kaugummi Books Retrospective  
Various Artists, An Evening with Future Plan and Program  
Pia Howell, Cool Ranch  
Megan Plunkett, High Noon  
Jessica Baran, Reading: Remains to Be Used  
Erik Lindman, One Year Edit  
Twice Removed: A Survey of Take Away Work, curated by Karly Wildenhaus  
Derek Chan & Ayako Yamasaki, Thirty and Eight

2010

Je Suis une Bande de Jeunes, BRUIT DE FOND Release Party  
Lauren Anderson, Aylor Brown, Derek Chan, Paul Cowan, Lee Lynch, Megan Plunkett, Jon Rafman, Smith + Linder, and Mylinh Trieu Nguyen, Permanent Collection at Important Projects  
Derek Chan, Cries and Whispers From the Salt Song Trail Release Party  
NY Art Book Fair, MOMA PS1  
Jon Rafman, The Age Demanded  
Lauren Anderson, Aylor Brown, Derek Chan, Paul Cowan, Lee Lynch, Megan Plunkett, Jon Rafman, Lisa Smith & Caroline Linder, and Mylinh Trieu Nguyen, Permanent Collection at White Flag Projects  
The Suburban, Can I Come Over to Your House: The First Ten Years of The Suburban  
Lauren Anderson, Faux Weirdo  
Alex Fuller and Gabe Usadel, The Sameness Book Release Party  
Golden Age at Hot Off The  
Mark McGinnis, Front Forty Profiles Series Release Party  
Zachary Kaplan, Popular Reactions to September 11  
Michael G. Bauer, Emilie Halpern, Sidonie Loiseleux, McIntyre Parker, Eric Yahnker, Uncover, Discover, Discard  
Book Club Nutz  
Paul Cowan, Alla Prima  
Chicago Zine Fest

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2009

Alex Da Corte, Activity #91

Craig Hansen and Chris May, Reflections Passed

Alex Fuller and Gabe Usadel, The Incredible Journey That is Consciousness

Anna Peaker, Brock Potucek, Elina Minn, Jaakko Pallasvuo, Emily Ryan, Eric Marth, Jason Rosenberg, Jessica Williams, Lucas Soi, Megan Plunkett, Michi Turner, Pia Howell, and Tara Sinn, Medium Rare

NY Art Book Fair

Motherwell Release Party

Nicholas Gottlund, Plain and Fancy

Silk Flowers, In-store Performance

Javelin, In-store Performance

CHIRP Record Fair at Pitchfork

Wet Hair, Lichens, Dead Luke, Pale Blue Sky, Cloaked Light, In-store Performance

Marianne Hurum, Sign Rhymes

Megan Plunkett, I Don't Care About the Rest of the Year

NYC Zine Fest

Golden Age Gift Shop at Believe Inn

Fortuning and Baby Birds Don't Drink Milk, In-store Performance

Cadaver Corpse, curated by Tessa Perutz

Robin Cameron, Mind Maps

Lukas Geronimas and David Horvitz, The Box Game

ASDF Makes, In Real Life In Real Time

Tom Greenwood, Ron Burns, BARR, Lichens, Vaguely Paperly

Aurelien Arbet, Jeremie Egry, Nicolas Poillot, Taxis Pleins, Taxis Vides

Lukas Geronimas and David Horvitz - The Box Game

## II. “WHAT DO YOU DO?”

Martine Syms

My cover letters usually begin with something to the effect of “I am a graphic designer with over five years of experience developing communication projects in partnership with non-profits, artists and creative businesses.” I resisted being a graphic designer for as long as I could, but I've gotten many more jobs since owning up to it. I knew too many graphic designers who sold Brand X during the day, but really wanted to be artists, and I resented them.

I sell nothing, which is to say I sell ideas. I think—but I'm very uncomfortable using “thinker” as a descriptor. I started using the term “conceptual entrepreneur” to

describe myself in the winter of 2008. I had been playing around with various titles since 2006. It seems silly in retrospect, but I wanted a title. I needed something to corral my interests and explain my various activities. I settled on “conceptual entrepreneur” because it sounded right, seemed original and connected me to the artwork that I most enjoyed.

In “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” artist Sol Lewitt writes:

“In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”

The entrepreneur’s objective is, in no order, to make money and to create value. A conceptual entrepreneur then has an idea that “becomes a machine” that makes the money/value/art.

Marco Kane Braunschweiler

For the longest time I’ve really been holding onto this idea that I’m an artist and will be a superstar artist, like Jeff Koons, Richard Serra and many of the other strong male artists that I admire. For the life of me I can’t let go of this idea because so much of how I identify is that I’m part of this group that includes the future of art and in this fictional version of myself I’m moonlighting as an arts professional, a future great who’s to be fit directly into the history books included with an incredible group of young artists working today. People always asked me if Golden Age is my art practice. I always said no because I sternly believe in the division of labor: makers make, gallerists run galleries, and never shall the two meet.

Now, the more I think about this the more I realize that I don’t really care to be an artist; the headache, the heartbreak, the constant solicitation, the lack of clarity and daily re-determination of reality, this may just be too much for me as a profession. And so we’re clear, I do have the desire to be a professional. I value facts, I value history, and even though I know it’s problematic at times, I want to be history, in fact, so much of what I do now is focused on the history of art.

I read, write, speak, make observations about the world, and create plans. I believe that everyone is responsible for creating the reality they want to see. What do I do? I make art make sense.

III. A CONVERSATION, FEBRUARY 19, 2012, 7:30 PM

MARTINE SYMS: Introduce yourself.

MARCO KANE BRAUNSCHWEILER: My name is Marco Kane Braunschweiler. I've worked in art since 2007, I ran a space called Golden Age, and I currently make videos and photographs.

MS: Why do you describe your practice as working in art as opposed to “making” art?

MKB: Because I help other artists execute their ideas.

MS: Then separately you make videos and photographs, but you don't consider that art?

MKB: I consider that art, but I don't consider helping other artists produce work to be art, that's a separate thing.

MS: That's work.

MKB: Yes, art and then work. Work can be art.

MS: But not for you?

MKB: Not right now. For instance, someone who I think is really good at their particular skill and elevates it to a level far above the norm; I would qualitatively designate this person an artist. They may not be a professional contemporary artist but they are an artist nonetheless.

MS: So for you “art” is doing something skillfully.

MKB: Yes.

MS: “The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.”

MKB: Yes, art.

MS: I just want to understand your working definition of the term. Where are you from originally?

MKB: Just outside of Omaha, Nebraska.

MS: Were you involved in the art community in Omaha?

MKB: No, I spent much more time skateboarding, I took art classes and drew and read, my mother encouraged both, but I was much more involved in skateboarding.

MS: What brought you to Chicago?

MKB: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the desire to live in a city.

MS: What made you continue working in art?

MKB: I think art is the best format for communicating unfettered individual ideas.

MS: What are some unfettered individual ideas that you've had?

MKB: Well, to start, a restaurant that exists in zero gravity. [Laughs.]

MS: Aerospace engineering would probably be the best field for that, or culinary

school. To clarify, I was asking about unfettered individual ideas that you've completed. In other words, tell me about some of your projects.

MKB: Golden Age is one. I mean that's yours too but I feel like it was really an unfettered vision, it was a place of pure intention. The goal was to make Chicago a better place by creating something I wished was already in existence.

MS: Do you feel like you accomplished your goal?

MKB: Yes, I do, I think it will be seen to have a long-term effect as a springboard for a lot of very important artists, curators, designers and writers.

MS: So you haven't seen an immediate impact?

MKB: Well, I shouldn't say that.

MS: Say whatever you want.

MKB: I have people tell me that it was very important to them, but the notion that we would all get rich from this bookshop is no longer in my mind.

MS: Did you think that at one point?

MKB: I think at one point I did believe it was possible, that a community supported art bookshop in Chicago could work, but I don't think it can.

MS: When you say could work; do you mean commercially or just plain work, at all?

MKB: Both, the culture doesn't support it.

MS: It existed, so the culture does/did support it.

MKB: That's true.

MS: Did you hope it would make (more) money?

MKB: Yes.

MS: Do you think there's any money to be made in art?

MKB: Yes. An incredible amount in fact. But the division is startling, or, no more startling than the economic condition of the rest of the country depending on how you look at it.

MS: Did you start Golden Age to improve your financial situation?

MKB: No. But I thought it was possible that it could.

MS: Are you disappointed that it couldn't?

MKB: No, but I was while the business was open.

MS: You're over it now?

MKB: Yes.

MS: That's good.

MKB: And I'm happy I made the decisions I did.

MS: What's next for you?

MKB: I want a summer house. [Laughs.] Just kidding.

MS: No, you're not!

MKB: You're right, I want a fucking summer house, and I want to be done with

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this bullshit, or go to law school, have a real profession. Fuck, I have no idea. Do not print that.

MS: Why not? I want to talk about “this bullshit.” I think you mean the art world and the inability for young artists to make a decent living.

MKB: Yes, you’re right.

MS: How come it’s so impossible for us to get paid?

MKB: Because nobody needs to know what the fuck young people think about art. Art is not only an old game but it’s also an old man’s game so anyone not fitting that description is at a disadvantage. Sure, as an artist being young is great, but for how long? You’re just another product to be bought and sold.

MS: You seem angry.

MKB: I probably am deep down, frustrated by it all, and it seems the more I know the angrier I get, the more I understand about the economics that actually underpin contemporary art the more it sickens me.

MKB: What do you want it to be like?

MS: I want it to be a more structured environment that values merit, dedication and professionalism.

MKB: You want rules.

MKB: Yes, I want rules. Not unspoken rules, that’s my problem with this fucking thing. It’s a load of hooey.

MS: So why bother?

MKB: It’s the only thing that’s interesting to me, really interesting. There’s romance, this idea that you can just be there to do your work, singular genius I guess.

MS: [Laughs.] So you’re stuck. What happens if you stop complaining and start working on infrastructure?

MKB: Yikes, then I’d be more like you. [Laughs.]

MS: [Laughs.] You’re funny.

MKB: That’s a good idea. So how do you work on art infrastructure? Law school? I’m seriously asking this now.

MS: Possibly?

MKB: These are my thoughts.

MS: I think there are several ways to approach infrastructure. I think the first thing is establishing the need; I don’t think we did a good job of that at Golden Age.

MKB: Yes, that’s true.

MS: We did a project that no one needed, that’s why it wasn’t commercially viable. We had a very small market.

MKB: So how do we create an infrastructure for a more structured environment that values merit, dedication and professionalism?

MS: I think there are two related issues: values and needs. What does the art world

value and what does it need? Money is an obvious first guess. Economic capital, I should say. How can you generate economic capital? How can you transfer cultural capital into cash? It's a business model question. The existing business model for art doesn't work, neither in the for-profit or non-profit realm. In the commercial sector you need rich people—end of story. In the public sector you need, wait for it, rich people! Perhaps this sounds naive, but I feel like that's the root of the problem. I have nothing against rich people, I love them dearly and I need their help. I'm not even talking about "democratizing" art. I'm suggesting we find new ways to generate revenue. We obviously can't rely on grants. What young person do you know who thinks they will ever get an NEA grant?

MKB: None. So what exactly is the practical application of this? What are examples of new ways?

MS: I don't know yet. I'm in the theoretical stage. I feel like Golden Age was one experiment.

MKB: Absolutely, next time, e-books.

MS: [Laughs.] I like the Hollywood model personally. When I say "Hollywood," I mean the way a film is organized, although, those don't make much cash either.

MKB: What is it you like about the Hollywood model as it exists now?

MS: It's streamlined.

MKB: How so?

MS: There is a clear goal, in terms of production and distribution. I think art has a distribution problem, how do you get the art to your audience? Art Fairs solved it for a while and then they became prohibitively expensive—too many looky-loos.

MKB: Not enough active consumers. So then sponsorships and advertising become part of it. Following that the fairs are no longer profitable vehicles and they get dumped summarily; boom and bust.

MS: Exactly, if you fix the distribution problem, you'll get somewhere. So find the value, the need, and figure out how to deliver that value/need.

MKB: So that's where we are, we've made significant progress, we understand the problem, we can find a solution, and we're working towards that solution.

MS: Si, se puede!

MKB: So American.