Received Dissent: An American Mail Art Project
Graves Gallery Sheffield 3 April to 28 July

In 1968 Richard Hamilton designed the cover for the Beatles' White Album. The first 2 million copies of the LP were each mechanically stamped with a different letter-number combinations, making nonsense of the title of the 'limited edition'. Earlier the same year, Hamilton had contributed a work for a US periodical called S/M.S., available only to relatively insipid postcard subscription, bypassing the gallery system. The line issues of S/M.S. all took the form of a card envelope containing up to 12 specially commissioned multiple art objects in editions of 2,000. Hamiltón's work was a photographic re-employment of a fold-out suite postcard format. Somewhere, the mass-market LP cover and the ephemeral art object seemed part of the same whirl.

S/M.S. was a publishing project of the original artist and cultural animators William N. Copley (1929-1996) whose life might have been a fictional narrative. The adopted son of a newspaper magnate, Copley possessed and used a substantial private income throughout his life which was divided between being a full-time painter, running a commercial art gallery and creating a foundation to support creative individuals. What is for sure, on the evidence of the great variety and fertility of ideas embodied in these many small multiple artworks, is the openness of Copley's support for other artists and unwillingness to opt for the easiest way of doing anything. The circumstances of his adoption enabled him to make use of high-quality and unusual techniques for printing large editions. But even so, for example, how did they produce 2,000 mail-burned bow ties for the artist Lili Fickler's work in S/M.S. No. 5.

In S/M.S. veteran artists, including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Muet Openneme and Roland Penrose, featured alongside young artists trying to establish a presence on the art scene. Hardcore conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth and On Kawara Antoninically accompanied US and European Pop artists, experimental composers like John Cage and La Monte Young, and poets including the Irish surrealist writer George Reavey (represented by a blank page on a long binding scroll). Indeed, the dividing line between the disciplines of poet and collagist, musician and visual artist, disappear or cease to have any useful validity within the context of this publication. Art critics and art dealers were also invited to contribute to S/M.S., not as interpretative or critical writers, but as creators of artworks of their own, paid like all contributors a standard $100 fee. Gallery owner Julie Levy's colourful drug capsule cases, each with a written-out prescription for a famous artist, provides us now a pre-echo of Damien Hirst. Other artists were invited to contribute who would have been excluded by the 'hat-system' art world: the outsider artist Pinewoof, a poet writing from his prison cell, and drawings by Lee Looam, currently being reappraised regarding her formal withdrawal from the New York art world at this time. S/M.S. here does not stand for Short Message Service, it stands for Shit Must Stop. This was 1968, and there is a dark, dissonant edge to much of the playfulness that informs the work.

During the 30 years since their publication, S/M.S. multiples have never been exhibited in their entirety in the UK. Mail Art can end up anywhere. Why has this exhibition surfaced unexpectedly in Sheffield? A set of the whole run of S/M.S. in immaculate condition, has been acquired by the Sheffield-based designer and collector Martin Hinchcliffe and, in the spirit of the original enterprise, he wanted everyone to see them. S/M.S. was a project that hovered between art and direct marketing. It was ideal for free of charge and involved an integral element of exchange or reciprocity and artist's multiples. Here, each object has been nearly formally if carefully displayed in a virtuoso fashion. A little contextual illusion might not have gone amiss — perhaps by exhibiting a copy of Apex, another US based arts magazine, which set a precedent for S/M.S. and shared some contributors. An essential element is probably missing: the unanswerable question of receiving one of an S/M.S. portfolio via the postman at the front door, and the tactile and supreme experience of opening it and removing its contents. The consequence is a mood of open, unfulfilled, turn-over and examine these multiples cannot be satisfied.

The small scale and finesse of these objects, prints and facsimiles amplifies their oddity. Perhaps we should just give in and want them. Maybe they could use S/M.S. No. 5 for a 7-inch vinyl disc with a spinning tool in white affixed to it, and for someone who is a Duchamp completist and a vinyl record fetishist, it would be a deeply covetable acquisition.

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Jennet Thomas: Animal Condensed » Animal Expanded
Tintype London 14 June to 14 July

Tintype's shopfront window displays half a dozen black-and-white, tomatoe-lime polka dots and khaki desert tones bearing crudely drawn facial markings. From comic strips to street art like weed objects, up close, the DIY nature of the expanded frame and ploster totemic 'heads' atop cheaply wrapped wooden poles suggest a kids' art class which is apropos given that much of Jennet Thomas's recent work takes as its starting point a longboarding trip in terms of using sci-fi and abducted theatrical modes to think differently about societal issues. This is not to say that the work is not sophisticated (far from it), it denotes the importance of a childlike misconception in a way that is utterly knowing and sarcastic: in its combining of often glibly coloured materials with and within fast-paced, highly ornate, narrative film works. Animal Condensed » Animal Expanded 'continues' Thomas's exploration of possibilities for artistic resistance to the corporatisation of forms of life, here to a seemingly bizarre kind of pharmaceutical animal husbandry that advances species being by crossing humans, animals and technical wizadry. The outing at Tintype gives central stage to Animal Condensed » Animal Expanded No. 2, Thomas's second film in a planned trilogy, while Animal Condensed » Animal Expanded No. 2, which I originally saw projected large scale at Ictus 336 in Bristol, her hometown, she has a small floor monitor in a corner of the installation space. The new work belittles loudly, while one has to don headphones to hear the, in this instance, subdued soundtrack to it. The surrounding gallery walls are covered with black- and-white streamers, the floor with black-and-white tiles, a colour scheme that echoes the black-and-white optical screen inserts that in #2 generate expansive virtual environments or appear contracted on character's hands, referring perhaps the scanning technologies that encode and monetise identity in the contemporary world.

Migrants sometimes cut the skin off their fingernails to avoid detection. Thomas's film is not about such subjects matter but nonetheless can be seen as an allegory of the curtailment of human freedom by data recognition technology, as well as a bizarre take on human animalisation. One of her two main characters is a guerrilla artist dressed in camouflage gear who, hiding out in a forest or in her studio, has 'shaved' herself; a survival strategy that relates to the black-and-white stripes of pottering groups whose goal is that everyone ingests a smart substance called 'Animal Condensed'. For the suburbanite 'make entrepreneur who represents this societal ethos of enhanced productivity, his inner Animal Expanded leads to his robotic mimicking of the movements of his hairless Catlike executive toy while pigeons multiply on screens. The film cross-cuts between him and his blonde-wigged daughter who interacts with a virtual Peppa Pig on her laptop, but rather than the child as a figure of innocence, and threatlessness, she is also complicit. Receiving a visitation from the Authenticity fetish character, a kind of totemic avatar who features in #1, she rejects its offer of a totemic coil weapon. Later her father reports: 'Look how her fibrins are improving, she is her own accelerated penis.'

This might sound like a mere parody of the futuristic desire to exit the human in favour of animal-machine hybrids, but there is more to it than that. Although I think that #2 needed more than its short 15 minutes duration for its allegorical associations to unfold, as it is more narratively driven than the MIV temporality of #1 and its snappy textual interludes, nonetheless, using the weird and the fantastical, the films think through contemporary issues of survival, the life food we eat, the ecologies we inhabit, and our futuristic aspirations as techno-pharmaceutical beings. For me, the 'we' here is an
urban western subject whose governance involves colonising its own embodiment, invading it with genetically modified substances that secure its place in a market economy.

Within the frame, resistance lies with the guerrilla artist, played by actress Alison Edmundston, who also starred as the resistant character ‘Glenda’ in Thomas’s The Unspeakable Freedom Device, 2015, and who I see as Thomas’s stand-in in these films. From Edmundston’s character’s desire to be undetectable via a materialist détournement of barcodes to the machinic voice-over interrogators who query her strategies, #2 also suggests an oblique parody of Hito Steyerl’s How Not to be Seen. A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File, 2013. It is as if Thomas is subjecting the high-end avatar invisibility that Steyerl muses on to a cyberpunk DIY material version.

Jarring bursts of shots of multiplying piglets and landfill full of discarded soft toys allude to the disregard for the totem animal in contemporary society, yet the film is not nostalgic. The transitional world of the imagination might be on the scrapheap, but nonetheless the artist can allegorise modes of resistance whose bizarre logic protects them from detection – unless one has the code, of course.

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Günther Förg: A Fragile Beauty
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
26 May to 14 October

Walls and windows, past and present. The window of an image, of the building it represents. The walls of a building, of the gallery in which its image appears. The past of a photograph, the present of a painting. These – in any number of recombinations – are the terms of Günther Förg’s art. Aren’t they also the fundamentals of visual art itself – do we look at a surface or through it? – and so as essential as it gets? Although Förg was always drawing on art of times and places that are not his own, it is notable that his work has not travelled as well as that of many of his German contemporaries; perhaps because its viewpoint is so personal, so of its moment and context; invoking landmarks of Modernism – a Melnikov window, a Clifford Still chasm – he leaves them behind by re-embodifying them, now, in mainland Europe.

Or rather then: Förg died in 2013, so his presenting of the past, and his presentations of that presenting, are now in the past. Or a series of pasts. This retrospective can feel like a complicated relativity puzzle: you looking back on him looking back, or finding himself unable to. Modernism is a line his hand cannot quite stay true to, a facade thrown askew by a camera; but it is also postures, styles, myths of sophisticated modern living, all of which exclude him and us, in our messy present tenses, by showing how the past is an artifice, an impermeable screen. His illusions stand in for what postwar German culture could not bring itself to look back on, except ‘periscopically’, as WG Sebald put it, a writer who came from the same part of southern Germany, the Allgäu, as Förg. Hence Förg’s penchant for photographing buildings associated with 20th-century fascism, not only in Germany, as if we could only bear to recall it from behind the walls it erected. In this sense, his is the most tactful art.

Nine, 2m-high 1991 photographs of the Bauhaus complex in Dessau are hung over a grey monochrome wall painting from a 2002 exhibition in Hamburg. The slight blur – a sign of both a hand-held camera and over-enlargement – is tremulous, an emotional register, like seeing something static through tears or agitation. Up close, you see scratches on the negative, the fuzz of aggregate. I know of no other photography so prepared to use one kind of realism to subvert another, in order to show the limitation of both. Zooming in, windows become cage structures, holding us at bay, disowning their referents.

Given that Förg’s wall paintings were made for particular galleries, and many of his paintings and photographs for particular installations, the curators are forced to aver the second-handness of the presentation of media for which this would not usually be an issue. The Dessau room is an installation time-specific in qualifying itself as unable to be site-specific, pitching a shaky synonymity between Förg’s retrospection and late-20th-century European culture’s concept of its past. These are also pictures of pictures, alluding for example to Aleksandr Rodchenko’s 1920s photographs of the looming balconies of Russian social housing. We are in limbo between points on a temporal axis drawn into directionality by Förg’s decision to paint the walls of a certain institution in a certain city a certain colour. One room, empty but for three walls painted beige, green and dark blue respectively, can only carry over its colours from a 1986 Cologne installation, not their relation to the original interior. His gouache studies for the wall paintings probably do the job better by leaving more to conjecture.

Förg’s art is diaristic, measuring itself against a past it can only speculate about, a future it anticipates through the past’s projections, like outdated science fictions. Compare Gerhard Richter’s evidential take on history via the images it has left; his confidence, despite the rhetoric of doubt, that the past can be traced by a photograph’s record. Four large photographs from 1986 of the interior of Mies van der Rohe’s Haus Lange in Krefeld are taken by a hired professional, hence the steady focus. That they are presented in a row, leaning on blocks, not hung, emphasises their blocky objecthood, countering the trompe l’œil illusionism by which the Stedelijk’s wooden floors appear extended by the parquet of Haus Lange, 30 years ago, one contemporary museum to another.