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Ruhlman Conference, 3 May 2006  
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Dating from 1982 and entitled *Any Artwork Strives*, the work that is before you consists of four veils of silk organza upon which the following text has been printed in grease pencil:

ANY ARTWORK STRIVES TO COMMUNICATE  
SOMETHING THAT CAN BE IMITATED BUT NOT  
EXPLICITLY STATED IN THE LANGUAGE  
IN WHICH IT IS COMPOSED  
NO MATTER HOW FLUENT YOU ARE IN THE LANGUAGE  
I CANNOT BE SURE THAT WHAT YOU  
THINK YOU SEE IS WHAT I REALLY  
MEANT TO SHOW YOU.  
THIS STATEMENT IS NOT THE ARTWORK BUT  
ONLY BAIT. IN READING, YOUR EYES  
DO WHAT IS NECESSARY FOR THE  
PIECE TO ACTUALLY SUCCEED.<sup>1</sup>

Printed on the foremost panel are lines one, five, and nine; on the second, lines two, six, and ten, and so on, such that the legibility of the text is obfuscated by the text of the panel preceding it as well as the materiality of the organza through which the viewer must peer if s/he is to decipher the text. Yet the text itself, whose presence is a veritable invitation to un-code it, states that doing so is almost incidental or tangential to the

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1. Rachel bas-Cohain, text of *Any Artwork Strives*, 1982, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College.

intended "meaning" or success of the work. And yet language and text form the crux of *Any Artwork Strives*, which is titled after, and therefore implicitly values, the very statement whose significance this work simultaneously denies. But even as the text demurely un-writes itself, its assertions linger. Language fails. Communication is one-way. It is the work and not the artist or "author" that speaks. And yet what the viewer "reads" is contingent on neither the effort of the work to communicate nor the ability of the viewer to comprehend its visual and verbal syntax. Furthermore, even if the viewer somehow perceives some meaning intended by the artist, this would be unknowable to the artist. And should s/he penetrate the silken layers and "decipher" the text, the viewer is confronted with a mysterious denial—the text is not the work but merely a device for engaging the active participation of the viewer in the work, whose success, whose meaning, is constituted in the viewer and the activity of perception, or more precisely, in the inevitable failure of perception, communication, and authorship--the failure of language.

Rachel bas-Cohain, the late artist who produced this intriguing, ethereal assemblage, is best remembered as a founding member of the radical feminist cooperative A.I.R.

Gallery. Despite her activism and prolific, significant artistic production, Bas-Cohain has been virtually written out of the art historical canon. Art historical considerations of the 1970s feminist art movement have emphasized women's artistic production that engaged in the reclamation and validation of processes, materials, and subject matter socially coded—and therefore debased—as “feminine.” Bas-Cohain's conceptual production lies outside this dominant paradigm, however, her decidedly subversive work is inflected by a feminist politic. And as she deployed a heterodoxy of non-traditional materials and methods of production, Bas-Cohain also engaged in a sustained critique of exclusionary practices and institutions, agitating for openness and inclusion in the art world and beyond.

*Any Artwork Strives* is a visual articulation of literary critic Roland Barthes' 1967 proclamation of the “death of the author,”<sup>2</sup> which is also an announcement of the death of genius (a designation implicitly applied to men) and the death of the artist (with a capital “A”). As argued by Barthes, genius and authorship are fictive—

2. Art historian Alex Alberro notes that Barthes' “Death of the Author” was first published in a 1967 edition of *Aspen* magazine guest-edited by art critic Brian O'Doherty. See Alex Alberro, “Inside the White Box: Brian O'Doherty's ‘Aspen 5+6,’” *Artforum International* 40, no. 1 (2001): 173.

socially constructed notions that serve a capitalist ideology.<sup>3</sup> As that which is most highly esteemed within the capitalist system, the supposed genius–author–artist is the site of a kind of alchemical transformation. By virtue of its identification with him, that which he produces, whatever he produces, is the equivalent of gold, and it is this valuation that sustains the myth of authorship. But Barthes declares that despite the tenacity of the myth of genius, the author is no more (if he ever was at all).

According to Barthes,

the text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning . . . but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash . . . to claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.<sup>4</sup>

As Barthes asserts, writing--this "tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture"--occurs in, is "focused" in the reader (or the viewer), who reads and *writes* the meaning of the text.<sup>5</sup>

"Any artwork strives to communicate," but every artwork also fails to signify any intention anterior to it--

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3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism, An Anthology*, eds. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 371.

4. *Ibid.*, 371-373.

5. *Ibid.*, 372-373.

meaning is varied, multiple, relative, contingent. "For the piece to actually succeed," the artist must relinquish meaning and authorship to her viewers, and so bas-Cohain does, sealing her own withdrawal with the syntactical sin of a split infinitive, transgressively wedging the word "actually" within "to succeed," a subtle act of defiance that also dis-assembles, de-structures language itself.

A second work that seems to privilege a multiplicity of "points from which to view" rather than that of a single, "ideal" viewer is bas-Cohain's *Construct in Cord and Nails # 1*. Dating from 1981, this work derives from bas-Cohain's series entitled "Flat Sculptures," a group of ephemeral works that extend bas-Cohain's critique to the art object, questioning its preciousness and undermining conventional classifications of the art object according to distinct media. *Construct in Cord and Nails # 1*, no longer exists as the "object" that it once was, if such a designation ever was applicable to this transient installation. As its photodocumentation confirms, this "anti-object" consisted of an architectural sort of arrangement of string and nails on grass. Plotted according to the mathematical perspective of illusionistic painting, *Construct in Cord and Nails # 1* seemed to shift from two dimensions to three, collapsing and popping in and

out of phantom materiality depending upon the vantage point of the viewer. A virtually two-dimensional work, *Construct in Cord and Nails # 1* paradoxically read as a three-dimensional work and implicitly invited the viewer to examine it as one would a sculpture in the round, viewing it from multiple perspectives. As it play-acted at multiple media, this work seemed to deny classification as an art object at all, presenting itself as a kind of drawing in string on grass, yet insisting on its sculptural quality, then, when destroyed, slipping into the immateriality of pure concept before reappearing as a kind of specter within its photodocumentation, a kind of simulacrum proferring itself as a work of art. As they challenge artificially established divisions between two and three-dimensional media, on a conceptual level, *Construct in Cord and Nails # 1* and bas-Cohain's "Flat Sculptures" implicitly undermine likewise artificial, socially constructed norms, divisions, and hierarchies. In their chimerical, illusionistic, illusory appearance and disappearance, these constructions also hint that the nature of reality itself is illusionary and ultimately contingent on perception, suggesting that the critical site for transformation and revolution of every sort is the mind.

Transformation and revolution are also elemental to bas-Cohain's *Frozen Grid*, the kinetic sculpture that is before you. When operating, *Frozen Grid* draws moisture from the atmosphere, which it then converts into ice crystals, which in turn transform this work's "cold," hard, copper scaffold into a soft, downy, curiously tactile and inviting filigree of white fuzziness, which, when unplugged, also dissolves into a puddle of watery disorderliness in the otherwise pristine space of the gallery.

As form, measure, and metaphor, the grid was a pervasive paradigm in the New York art world of the 1960s and 1970s. It can also be read as emblematic of modernist and masculinist structures of power that ordered, dominated, and defined the art world contemporary with bas-Cohain's production. Dating from 1973, *Frozen Grid* derives from bas-Cohain's parodic series ironically titled "How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Grid," which issues a playful, yet pointedly serious critique of the ubiquitous grid and its aesthetic and political referents. *Frozen Grid* itself is an overtly political, witty work that offers a feminist critique not only of the widespread sexism that marked the New York art world of the 1970s, but

also of the political climate and the Vietnam War contemporary with its production.

*Frozen Grid*, whose copper face and human height impart to it a curiously anthropomorphic quality, recalls the equally incisive, humanoid irrational machines of New York dada artists Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Art historian Amelia Jones has noted the longstanding use of the machine as a metaphor for the body, particularly in the industrial era in which the body, as a kind of "cog in the wheel of production and progress," became a thing to be regulated and rationalized into efficient use.<sup>6</sup> Jones further argues that the machine works of New York dada artists "[map] an ongoing process of negotiating . . . the radically new social and cultural terrain of machine-age New York,"<sup>7</sup> an unstable cultural milieu that would find a parallel in the socially and politically turbulent era of the 1960s and 1970s—the context for bas-Cohain's production half a century later. As Jones states, dadaist irrational machines "that ooze and leak"<sup>8</sup> articulate through "the body/machine nexus . . . the

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6. Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press), 117-118.

7. *Ibid.*, 126.

8. *Ibid.*, 119.

inevitable *failure of the process of rationalization successfully or fully to contain or regulate human bodies/selves*—a failure that parallels the failure of masculinity to cohere as a fully stable subject position in modernity or . . . artistic modernism,” as well as “the *failure and incoherence of industrial-era masculinity itself.*”<sup>9</sup> Considered in this light, the anthropomorphic neo-dada *Frozen Grid*, a “nonsensical” machine that performs a kind of ritual enactment of the dissolution of its own insubstantial coherence as its grid of ice melts into messiness, also alludes to the failure of rationalization and the speciousness of a coherent, autonomous masculinity, and as such, challenges the theoretical underpinnings that formed the basis for the discrimination women artists faced in the 1970s.

And just as the sometimes incisive, sometimes absurd art of dada was intended as a critique of World War I and the military-industrial complex that fueled widespread casualties, so too, bas-Cohain’s *Frozen Grid* extends its feminist critique to a denunciation of the political climate in which it was created and to the Vietnam War. By titling her grid series after Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 dark

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9. Ibid., 129.

comedy, *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*,<sup>10</sup> which questions the responsibility and integrity of international political players and presents the atomic bomb as a phallic extension of the power that such figures wield over the world and the fate of its inhabitants, bas-Cohain politicizes this series, protests the deadly political gaming of the cold war era, and joins a multitude of her artist contemporaries who, through their work, denounced the Vietnam War.

Formally, operationally, and chronologically related to bas-Cohain's *Frozen Grid* is a now defunct circa 1973 kinetic sculpture that just slightly predates it,<sup>11</sup> variously referred to as *Basement Pipes* and *Dripping Refrigeration Piece*.<sup>12</sup> (And here I'll just request your pardon as I discuss a work for which I can offer no visual reference but which offers insight into *Frozen Grid*.) Consisting of a network of plumbing pipes, *Basement Pipes*

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10. *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, DVD, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1964; Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2004).

11. Rachel bas-Cohain, interview by Christina Robb with Udayan Gupta and David Stone, c. 1976, audio cd, Archives of Rachel bas-Cohain, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College.

12. Rachel bas-Cohain, "Price List Rachel bas-Cohain," c. 1975, Series V: B, Archives of Rachel bas-Cohain, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College. David Stone, handwritten notation in Barbara Hollister, "Rachel bas-Cohain: Catalogue of Works, 1968-1982," May 1986, p. 1, Series V: B, Archives of Rachel bas-Cohain, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College.

was discreetly mounted on the ceiling of its exhibition space and leaked its watery contents into the gallery and onto viewers. Given bas-Cohain's political awareness and opposition to the war in Vietnam and given that the activities of the Nixon administration were of great concern to Americans and the world in the early 1970s, it seems reasonable to suggest that *Basement Pipes* may be read as a reference to the 1971 fiasco involving the "Pentagon Papers."

Referencing internal conduits housed in a less-frequented part of a building, the title *Basement Pipes* suggests a kind of underground, hinting at the secrecy that the Nixon administration tried to preserve regarding the United States' activities in Vietnam. When Pentagon employee Daniel Ellsberg released to the *New York Times* information of such secret activities in the form of the "Pentagon Papers," Nixon responded by creating a group called "the plumbers," whose mission was to prevent further "leaks" of secret information. Through her "leak piece," bas-Cohain seems to reference and celebrate such "leaks"—the dissemination of information pertaining to the scandalous activities of the Nixon administration. Additionally relevant is the way that the artist chose to

announce her 1973 exhibition, *Water Works*,<sup>13</sup> also the name of the series from which *Basement Pipes* derives,<sup>14</sup> and which would seem to reference not only the element of water, which is integral to these works, but also Watergate and the Nixon administration's deceptions prior to his reelection in 1972.

Considered in such a context, *Frozen Grid* invites an equally political reading. By donning its concealing, soft, inviting cloak, which hides its hard, "cold," resistant inner structure, *Frozen Grid* also embodies the idea of secrecy or a cover-up, a practice quite relevant to Nixon's activities, cold war politics, and the Vietnam War. One of bas-Cohain's notebooks reveals that as part of this series, she planned to produce a work to be titled *Gridlock*, a state also communicated through this grid that freezes and which suggests the intractability of the Vietnam War as well as the gridlock of global political tension during the cold war era. As this materialization of cold war tension is unplugged, its icy grid melts into water, metaphorically suggesting the much hoped for "thaw"

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13. See *Water Works* exhibition announcement, n.d., Series V: B, Archives of Rachel bas-Cohain, Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College; and *Rachel bas-Cohain, 1937-1982: Selected Works* (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1984), 22.

14. David Stone, handwritten notation in Barbara Hollister, "Rachel bas-Cohain: Catalogue of Works, 1968-1982," p. 1.

of contemporaneous political tensions and an end to the Vietnam War.

Hitherto unacknowledged, the highly political reading that I have offered on the work of Rachel bas-Cohain is but one "turn of the kaleidoscope," a single, circumscribed view of the rich and varied artistic production of this remarkable artist. Art historian T.J. Clark has asserted, "The artists that matter come at the fact of politics sideways, unexpectedly" rather than "apply an ideology . . . like a set of instructions or an undercoat of paint."<sup>15</sup> Although my position is more inclusive than Clark's seems to be, I would argue that the oblique feminist politic that pervades the artistic production of Rachel bas-Cohain is a significant aspect of her work that places her among "the artists that matter." Although "somewhat elevated," in a manner of speaking, art-critically and art-historically, bas-Cohain and her work have been caught "in the middle," a kind of threshold space of anonymity and denied the significance that they deserve.

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15. T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 178.