

HOW TO BUILD A SECRET CHAMBER: NOTES WITHOUT A TEXT

by

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ABSTRACT

How to Build a Secret Chamber: Notes without a Text, is a culmination of my work as a book artist, and it derives much of its inspiration from literary sources. Having much more in common with book arts than it might first appear, it is tangent to the tradition of installation and sculpture. Its walls are more like the flat planes of a book than the surfaces of a sculpture. The absurd premise to display a secret room was the starting point for this exhibition, and ultimately the room is read like a book about contradiction.

VITA

Candace Hicks was born February 14, 1980, Athens, Texas. She is the daughter of David and Cheryl Hicks. She has one child, David Lebaillif. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Austin College, Sherman, Texas.

Her solo exhibitions include *Common Threads*, North Harris College in Houston in 2009 and an earlier version of the same series was exhibited at Maria Elena Kravetz Gallery in Cordoba, Argentina in 2007.

In 2009 she received the Kimbrough Fund Grant from the Dallas Museum of Art. In 2005, she was awarded First Prize at the IV International Competition Artist's Books at Artempresa Gallery in Cordoba, Argentina.

HOW TO BUILD A SECRET CHAMBER: NOTES WITHOUT A TEXT

The universe (which others call the Library)...

Borges, *The Library of Babel*

In Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel," the narrator lives within an infinite library of books that contain infinite permutations of text. Within this library, it is rare to find a book that communicates a coherent statement. More often than not the books are random groupings of letters and meaningless, nonsense words. The librarians can spend a lifetime searching for texts that are more than gibberish in this labyrinth of nonsense, but this obstacle does not diminish their belief that the library contains all possible books, including books of ultimate truth. This notion of a library as a metaphor for all possible meanings makes it the ideal form for a secret chamber that offers the promise of hidden knowledge while simultaneously withholding definitive answers.

My thesis exhibition, titled *How to Build a Secret Chamber: Notes Without a Text*, is a culmination of my work as a book artist, therefore it derives much of its inspiration from literary sources, which is in keeping with my interdisciplinary approach to art making. Having much more in common with book arts than it might first appear, it is tangent to the tradition of installation and sculpture. Its walls are more like the flat planes of a book than the surfaces of a sculpture.

Significantly, Borges' protagonist and narrator becomes a writer by

telling the story himself. He creates the text rather than searching for it among the shelves. Using this as a point of departure, *How to Build a Secret Chamber: Notes Without a Text* sounds like a title of a do-it-yourself book or manual. The title refers to the instructional aspect of the work. It should be understood that the exhibition proposes a plan for something else that must be constructed by the gallery visitor.

The focal point of the exhibition is an all-white simulacrum of a library in which all the shelves face outward, like a room turned inside out. It is white to emphasize the form, in the sense of Platonic, ideal form. In its “finished” form the exhibition includes an electric sander and a brush in a bucket of paint to signify that the work is ongoing. The builder seems to have abandoned the project at a point near completion. While the structure implies that there is empty space within, the four sides read as planes or pages, an interpretation highlighted by the horizontal rows of wooden slats that recall the spines of books that resemble lines on a page. It is accurate to say that the piece is read rather than viewed or experienced. The visitor follows a path around the structure to discover a barely disguised door on the far side. The door opens with a pulley mechanism triggered by tilting or pulling a nearby book that obviously protrudes further off the shelf than the surrounding books. The title of the exhibition prepares the audience to view a secret chamber, and yet the secret entrance is plainly visible.

The irony of the subtitle, *Notes without a Text*, is that while the books are inaccessible, and the chamber is empty, the text, or the meaning, can still be constructed. The piece is accompanied by the two wall texts that read, “PLEASE

DO NOT TOUCH,” and in their bold, black font they declare themselves as part of the artwork, rather than institutional directives. These contradictions are central to the piece; after all, the paradoxical premise at its most basic is public display of a secret chamber. The words, presented in black vinyl directly on the wall, work as keys or clues for solving the puzzle posed by the constructed room. Rather than providing an ultimate answer or solution, the decoder finds that the text leads to a contradictory interpretation that is more about asking questions than answering them. The mystery is the content of the secret room. The room becomes a charged space that has the potential for containing answers, but the visitor is prohibited from entering.

My library is a both model and modular. The do-it-yourself aspect demanded a type of pre-fabricated construction. Presented as a hypothetical kit of the type available for mail delivery, the ersatz library is assembled from 4' x 8' sections of inexpensive medium density fiberboard. And as a model, the details are reduced to the most basic. The books are represented as spines that only protrude up to an inch from the wall. The design of the library is paired down to a simple, contemporary architecture with classic references. The library looks as though a single individual could have built it, and it seems that the configuration of the walls could be modified to suit another space. It retains an element of impromptu construction.

The idea of art making as model-making appeals to my artistic sensibility. The model seems a genuine form for art to take, as it implies that the work is never complete. The model communicates an idea that is approached

but not attained. My work to this point has always incorporated the concept of self-consciously made copies. For similar reasons, working within the realm of the copy is not only a way of avoiding the pitfalls of aspiring to originality in a simulated world; it is a recognition that art is equivalent to thinking as opposed to creating. As Joseph Kosuth explained, all works of art are models. In his interview in *Art 21*, Alfredo Jarr explains that he wants his work to be perceived as a model of his thought. If art can be understood as a thought model, it is a way of making thought physically present. *How to Build a Secret Chamber*, built on a 1:1 scale, references the map conceived by Borges (and later elaborated by Jean Baudrillard) because it synthesizes the copy and the model. I describe my model as built on a 1:1 scale, but there is no original. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that it is the same dimensions as one would expect bookshelves to be, but there is no specific real world reference.

In both Hillel Schwartz's *The Culture of the Copy*, and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, the model is described as a re-enactment. In McCarthy's novel, the protagonist also orchestrates full-scale re-enactments of events from his own life, culminating in a realization of Baudrillard's thought-experiment of a faked bank robbery. For Baudrillard and McCarthy's protagonist there is no discernible difference between a real bank robbery and a fake bank robbery. McCarthy's character obsessively models mundane events to give them meaning. I am borrowing this concept of the model as re-enactment, because it has the advantage of existing outside of time. The model as re-enactment could be preliminary, as in a plan for a future construction, or it could be a way of

commemorating past events.

Books as outmoded containers of information have been denigrated to the status of mere decoration, and while this is something I wanted to reference, my interest is not in making social commentary on literacy or a plea for the importance of books. The books in my library only function as pattern and only represent books, having lost their ability to signify. It is not by accident, however that the overall form calls to mind a funerary structure, something that it has in common with the *Nameless Library*, Rachel Whiteread's holocaust monument. The library is a façade reminiscent of the friezes that adorn Egyptian tombs.

There is an obvious humor in the comparison of a library with a tomb; the place books go to die. But the seriousness, communicated through dramatic low lighting, references another literary source, namely, the frequent use of libraries as masks for the entrances to secret passages in everything from British manor houses in gothic novels to Nancy Drew.

I used the form of the thought-experiment "Schrödinger's cat," because it is another model that I admire. Schrödinger, to express his incredulity at the implications of applying quantum mechanics macroscopically, formulated the paradox of a cat sealed inside a box with poison that may or may not be released to kill the cat. If probability, as defined by quantum mechanics, were applied to this situation the cat would be both half dead and half alive. The contents of the room are unknown, and the visitors are confronted with the text demanding that they "do not touch." Therefore, the beholder is invited to project the contents of the room. In this way the possibilities are endless.

In Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the footnote is used to multiply and displace the narrative. Nabokov weaves three separate narratives: an epic poem, the fictional commentary, and the inter-relationship between the two. It requires at least three readings to appreciate the complexity of his work of fiction. For Nabokov, the endnotes offer an opportunity for expanding the narrative. If one reads the subtitle of my exhibition, *Notes Without a Text*, with Roland Barthes' "From Work to Text" in mind, the declaration that there is no text would indicate a lack of meaning. I do not wish to deny meaning, but I am interested in displacing or de-centering it. Barthes distinction between the concrete "work" and the immaterial "text" is exploited to in my exhibition to maximize a paradoxical reading.

The absurd premise to display a secret room was the starting point for this exhibition, and ultimately the room is read like a book about contradiction. The reader is both prohibited and enticed to enter the room, and once inside, he finds himself to be the room's only occupant and content.

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PLATES





