

The Bending Potential of Nothing Happening
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What did it do? This is the question, a fairly conventional dictum, that I emphasize when considering an encounter with art. To be overly broad, when we look at an artwork, we are moved to feelings first and this is important. Whether ambivalence or love, to bump into something that can move us to feelings is an increasingly novel thing in a sociality assembled around the various doldrums of familiarity designed to neuter sensation to privilege the already known.¹ It is tempting (and valid) to report on an artwork with feelings, to move the *what did it do* to the *how did it feel* (or, to use the former to concentrate solely on the latter) and bask in that which cannot be argued against, i.e. the bricolage of things that pool together in us that we call “taste” (and can harden into “connoisseurship” or “stubbornness”). Yet, as we know, the province of judgement and its near cousin, the spicy or hot take, is a subscription to the immutable or universal. Reporting on how an artwork made you *feel* is to adjust its potential for ecstasy to your desires. This is folly in that those desires are never all yours.²

So, we return to *what did it do?*, which can move us to consider other registers of an encounter with art, shift the valence of aesthetic judgement to relational curiosity, and more generally aid in the consideration of what art, a very old idea now, can still do in moments of perpetual and epistemological crisis. Sometimes, and even accidentally, art can shift its status from a *thing* to a *way* and when this happens, we are confronted with the very best that it can do, which is give us something that escapes conventional encounter, standard dividends, or easy discourse. Art as a *way* proceeds with no readymade mode of evaluation and it reminds that art, at its best, can actually be the production of new knowledge. Art as a *way* is art at its messiest, its parentheses of a priori giving us cracks of clarity but little direction on how to proceed in judgement. It’s a black hole, a void. Its nothingness, however, becomes less a referendum on the artwork but on the general expectations of clarity, politics, signifiers, and other this’ and that’s of cultural witness, full of borderlines but in reality, borderless. When we attend to art as a *way* with *what does it do?* we can attempt to address the situation not in any straightforward way, but rather one that accepts and embraces this event as uncertain terrain. It is, to bring it back to feelings and their conjoined manias, proceeding with love.

With some reticence of having over mystified above (but how to put language to the subject of that which willfully escapes language?!) let’s consider a relevant case study. First, some context: in the Dunning neighborhood of Chicago (northeast enough to nearly hit the city limits), Erin Toale has opened the back porch and yard of her home (shared with Taylor Briggs) for a dissolved white cube space called “Bird Show.” Annually (in the warmer months), artworks are commissioned and exhibited by (mostly) local artists who more often than not create these works specifically for the wildlife that inhabit Toale’s and Briggs’ backyard. Works shown are almost always sculptural, quite often have some element of foodstuff as a means to attract animal participation (for better or worse), and come from a rich tradition (paved via many varieties of institutional critique and social practice art) of pondering the radical possibilities of

¹ See *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, *Fuller House*, the 36 variants of Taylor Swift’s *Tortured Poets Department*, and the whole of Donald Trump.

² John Berger says in 1972, expanding on Walter Benjamin for the TV age, that the fact of mechanical reproduction has allowed us to see an artwork “in the context of [our] own life.” What Berger, and countless others since, have mined are both the how this happens and what it means for universalist concepts of judgement.

the hermetic or that which is designed for non-human.³ The final work shown in the 2024 season was troy briggs' (no relation to Taylor) *a fold*, a small "mechanism" that resembled the coin elongation machines one might see at science museums or tourist traps. The innards of *a fold*, viewable through plexiglass, were a series of gears that turned whenever birds landed on an attached lever (above which was bird food). When activated these gears would turn and "slowly bend a US silver dollar" which was housed in a linked compartment of the mechanism. There is lots to consider with this ambition, such as the relocation of hierarchies of strength from humans to nature, the literal flexibility of currency (and where it's from), and the place of industrial machinery relative to the delicate machinations of the natural (a veritable Babel on this topic has exists from Karl Marx to Norbert Weiner to Charles Schulz). Really, like so much of the work found at Bird Show, it was an experiment, using art as an occasion to see what other possibilities (in this case, with nature) might occur.

Like all experiments, there is the likelihood of failure. When I arrived to see the work for the show closing, briggs gave me a short demonstration of how *a fold* was designed to work. I'm fuzzy on the exact details, but for whatever reason, the gears weren't turning and by all accounts *a fold* was out of service. This was unfortunate news for me, and certainly briggs, but maybe good for the birds, who could get a free meal without any requisite work. It would be tempting, if not a tad too easy, to consider *a fold* in a historical legacy of planned obsolescence, a kind of miniature accidental homage to Jean Tinguely that used the junk of industrialization (and its current nostalgia for the junk of yesteryear) to show it for the easily fallible bluster it actually was. Complex machines break down, nature carries on looking for something to eat. Yet, this isn't quite right. briggs *wanted* this machine to work, to do, like any machine, what it was designed for. The machine's break down, accidental and antithetical to the ambition, is nonetheless now part of its story.

To be sure, *a fold* did achieve some of its coin bending goals prior (although I am unsure to what extent), was a focal point for birds, raccoons, and other animals throughout its Bird Show duration, and served as an occasion for an arts experience in the ecosystem of alternative exhibition making. However, upon my encounter with it, *a fold* just sat there, unable or unwilling to demonstrate what it was designed to do. It existed as an object for formal study, but, while finely crafted, the mechanism itself was never really the main thrust. This is where we can return to the notion of moving art away from its thingness, its function, and into what it does when it's considered as an exquisitely unmanageable entity. How do we report on this encounter? What is achieved when our original question of *what did it do?* is transformed into *what do we do?* How do we write about that which resists becoming an event? What to say about nothing happening?

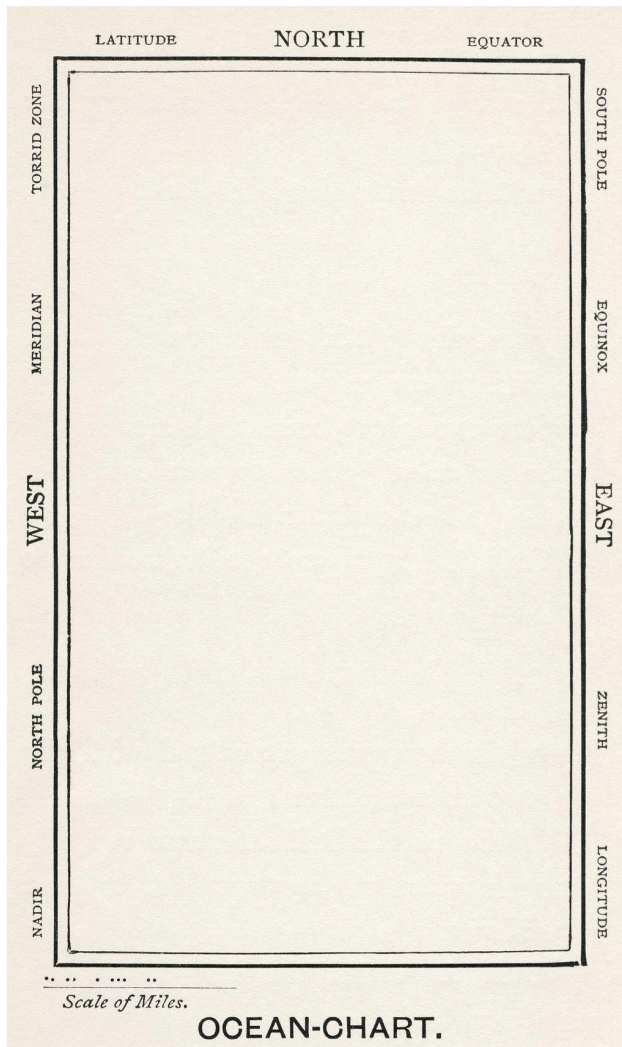
The following is a map from Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, a nonsense poem that concerns a shipbound crew of individuals hunting an elusive creature. The map, although indicating an ocean chart, shows us (and the poem's crew of characters) nothing. While this is designed to be an absurdity, Carroll nonetheless writes his character's defense of this map:

*...And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.*

³ An easy example is earth and land art, but we can expand into other projects that generally make their emphasis on the politics of encounter outside of museological subservience (Renee Green's spin on Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* or conversely, the in-museum use of birds on electric guitars in Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's *From Hear to Ear*).

*“What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?”
So, the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply
“They are merely conventional signs!”*

*“Other maps are such shapes with their islands and capes!
But we’ve got our brave captain to thank”
(So the crew would protest) “that he has brought us the best –
A perfect and absolute blank!”⁴*



This map is productive for the crew in that it doesn’t impose any sort of navigational function. Escaping “conventional signs” allows them to chart their own direction, to project their own meanings onto their given surroundings. While this map illustrates fairly literally the poem’s own general thesis of the folly for hunting that which escapes us, it is failing to provide the necessary information that justifies its existence. Yet, here, this fact does not make the map a failure but rather points us to consider the role of function and failure.

So much of failure is about conflicting spheres of meaning (like humor, which is why they often work together, as we see in the absurdist ocean chart). Failure is to make distinct aberrance. It’s a comparison exercise really. To understand what constitutes success one must firmly understand what constitutes a lack of success. But success is a slippery thing, wet with a host of conventions and precedents that dominate as much as they maintain a roster of things that defy conventions and precedent. To move less murkily: one cannot account for what success is without failure. To this end, failure is infinitely more generative in that it gives us a multitude of things, attempts, gestures,

moves that defy common use value. To be mindful of the limits of a poetic, failure can be weaponized as its own mode of success, as we see in various epistemological crises that have occurred in the 21st Century so far (apocalypse riders have never been so proudly dumb, riding in on their sloths that they insist are horses). However, to consider the production of failure as

⁴ Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*, 1876.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43909/the-hunting-of-the-snark>

an ongoing process of attempts at generating (to be mindful of attribution for a moment and quote CLR James) “new worlds, new verse, new passwords,” which is to say, an outlet for performing life in a radically different fashion, is why it may yet have some force. It suggests that we can’t quite emulate the familiar, and rather than simply insist we can, draws up other maps for us to follow.

To return then to what *we do?* when nothing happens, a question born from my encounter with *a fold*, I want to conclude by returning one more time to *what did it do?* To be sure, *a fold* did achieve some of its coin bending goals (although I am unsure to what extent) prior to my first and only encounter with it.⁵ However, on my visit, it refused, maybe a tantrum or a revolt, to share its capabilities with me. It seemed to say instead, “look at me, I’m a proposal dressed up as an object.” While I certainly want to be mindful of intention and the frustration that arises when something does not go as planned, that *a fold* didn’t “work” was a gift. It foregrounded its concept and in doing so pushed me to think about how ideas persist regardless of the plausibility of their executions. This persistence is really what art is, a radical thing that, at its best, demands we consider things – merely conventional signs after all - in ways they haven’t been considered before.

⁵ Following Bird Show, *a fold* disappeared, an unfortunate passenger in the trunk of the artist’s car which was stolen. As of this writing it has yet to be returned. Perhaps, like its stubborn refusal to operate as design, its escape is yet further proof of its desire for dematerialization, to be remembered for what it said not what it was.