

Ben Kinmont

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Ben Kinmont, *Sshhh*, 2002–. Installation view, Whitney Museum.

Since 1988, Ben Kinmont's work has often unfolded through real-time exchanges—over meals, in conversations, and through gestures. In 1996 he began his publishing project, Antinomian Press, which focuses on ephemera and archival material; he also has an ongoing antiquarian bookselling business, founded in 1998, that specializes in books and manuscripts about domestic economy and food. Here, Kinmont discusses the origins and evolution of Sshhh, which is currently on view in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. On Saturday, May 10, Kinmont will distribute part of this work to participants in the museum. He will also have a solo exhibition at Air de Paris from May 24 to July 8, 2014.

IN 2002, for Documenta 11, I went out onto the streets of Kassel and into strangers' homes for ten days to ask people what was the most meaningful thing in their lives. I also asked whether that meaningfulness could (and should) be understood as art. Then, we talked about the difference between that meaningfulness and what they typically experience in the museum. Their responses were summarized into a flyer that was then printed on the sidewalk in front of their house and distributed in the neighborhood in which the conversation occurred. The project was called *Moveable type, no Documenta*.

A few months later, the flyers were again printed (with the same portable equipment and format) and distributed as a group show of ten conversations. At that time, I wondered about the difference between, on the one hand, writing conversations in a domestic setting and reading the text in the participants' neighborhoods and, on the other hand, doing a similar thing in the context of the museum.

Then, a year later, I was invited to France to do a project with the Centre National de l'édition et de l'art imprimé (CNEAI) in Chatou, France. I proposed a new piece titled *Sshhh*, which was an invitation to families in Chatou to have a private conversation among themselves as an artwork. When the conversation was finished I asked them to tell me their family name and the date on which the conversation occurred. I also requested that they not tell me anything about the subject of the conversation or what it meant to them. Lastly, I explained that I would be making them an engraving and that they should pick the engraving's ink color and size.

Once the conversation had occurred and the participants had sent me their information, I printed each engraving in an edition of four: one copy for the family; one for the project archive; one for CNEAI; and one for the Bibliotheque Nationale (which receives one copy of all printed works produced by CNEAI). The engraving is almost entirely blank. At the bottom of each sheet, however, are the name of the family and the date of their conversation in small letters.

The *Sshhh* engraving is an artwork that can circulate within the art world while referencing a conversation had by a family on a specific day. To all but the family, though, it is a closed door to a private, domestic moment, the subject and meaning of which was determined by the family. And to the family who participated, their engraving is an aide-memoire to a conversation once had. They can look at the sheet and remember what they said with their family members on a given day about a given subject. It is an artwork that remains private.

In this sense, the engraving functions within two different value structures: that of the art world and its discourse around engravings and participatory art as well as that of a family's domestic life where conversations regularly occur with various levels of meaning and yet often pass by unnoticed or forgotten.

For the Whitney Biennial, I am displaying the archive for *Sshhh* and am also reactivating the project. I again invited visitors to send me a note containing their name and the date—but not the content—of a conversation they have had at home. The archive is out on a table for visitors to handle and the documents are available for free download on the Whitney's website. The budget for the reactivation allows for one hundred family participants (in Chatou it was fifteen). This time each engraved sheet is printed with lead type in an edition of two: one for the participating family and one for the project archive. The sheets have just been made and their distribution to the participating families will occur in the room where the archive is on display: Whitney Museum, fourth floor, this Saturday, May 10, at 11 AM.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*

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