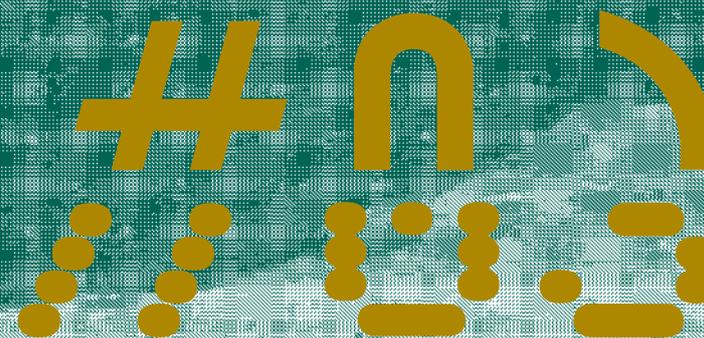


#03

ZAKŁADY NA ŻYCIĘ
(PLANT-LIFE)



ARTYST

JAMES BECKETT

DATA

MARCH 2010

ON THE LABELLING OF EXHIBITS

TRANSCRIPT OF PAPER READ
BY WILL HOLDER ON 12TH FEBRUARY, 2010,
AT THE WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON.

NOTE: THE ORIGINAL PAPER* HAS BEEN ABBREVIATED.

I.

I wish to put before you a scheme which for a long time I have had at heart. Briefly stated, it is that in Exhibitions the Exhibits might be accompanied by informative LABELS.

The information in these Labels would approximately be Technical, Functional, and Intentional. The Label attached to any Exhibit would reveal to other Craftsmen, and to the Public – and to the Critics – things which were not obvious in the Exhibit itself, things about it not generally known, or known only to Craftsmen, special *Conditions* attaching to the Exhibit, and, where possible – the most difficult and the most important revelation – the Intention of the Craftsman who made it.

In the case of nearly every Exhibit these things are best known to the Craftsman who made it. Whether he can become vocal about it, in the necessarily limited space of a small Label, is another question, to which I have largely devoted this paper.

II.

I give an extract from a Letter which I wrote to the Honorary Secretary of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators, in March 1931, proposing “that Exhibitors should write *critical* and *explanatory*, or possibly *apologetic*, labels to accompany their work. Such labels might give briefly, 1. Technical notes on Construction. 2. The Design in relation to the *Data* and/or the Scribe’s Intention. 3. The Scribe’s opinion of the Result–what he thinks good and what bad in it.

Such labels would add greatly to the value of any Exhibition and tend enormously to mitigate its drawbacks. The Craftsman knows these three things about his own work better than anyone else does, and most Craftsmen should be able to attempt a brief statement *in the universal medium of words*, besides the ‘Statement’ in effect, that they have already made in the Work itself, in the Medium of their own Craft.”

III.

Now let us consider some of the disabilities of Exhibitions which might be mitigated, at least, if such Explanation by Craftsmen could be made.

There is something necessarily artificial about a formal Exhibition. The objects are *posed* in a gallery to be *looked at*, and the Percipient – *i.e.*, the ‘Public’– can use only *one* of his five senses–sight–in appreciating them.

But even the sense of sight is restricted to viewing *motionless material effects* – often little more than one-sided views. The Exhibits cannot by action demonstrate their fitness for use. We may not touch, still less handle or try the use of Things meant to be daily used and handled. An Exhibition is, in fact, apt to be a kind of *lying in state* – of Talent at rest: the action must be imagined. Broadly speaking, *all* is left to the eye and to the imagination.

Is there any way in which we can assist eye and imagination – tell the Public *what* he sees and hint at *how* it works – bring him more nearly face to face with the great question *why*?

Something has been done with catalogues and catalogues raisonnés, but as a rule they go little beyond naming the Thing, the Maker, and the Owner. We can’t afford to expand the catalogue with individual notes: its function is practically limited to *Naming the Thing*. But a Label, giving an *Explanatory Expansion of the Name*, could be directly attached to the Exhibit, by the Craftsman himself.

IV.

Now let us consider the question of whether the Craftsman can make Verbal Explanations. It is true that his work is a sort of special language, and that it ‘speaks’ for him, and with his special personal accents, and that, by virtue of Material, Purpose, and Place, it says more, and even other than he himself would say. The Thing he makes not only speaks for him, but also speaks for itself.

The Handicraftsman, unless a poet, cannot *translate* into

Words all that he says in his *Works*. But he can discuss his Works with another of his own Craft.

And because the different tongues of the *different* Crafts are branches of one language of Creation, the workers in the different Crafts understand each other’s words to a great extent. If this were not so, there would be much less point in our Society.

And because, *to be Human* is to be Creative, besides being many other things in common with humanity, the Public can understand to some extent what the Craftsman says through his Work. And also (I maintain) the Craftsman can to some extent communicate to the Public his knowledge or feeling about his Work, in words. If other mortals were Craft-blind or Craft-deaf there would not be much point in our having Exhibitions. If we could not put some of our thoughts into words,– we had better give up talking.

My contention is then, that though each one of us Craftsmen speaks *by Signs* in his own special branch of the language of Creation, and with his own special accent, yet – even to those who are technically ignorant of both – our Works can, and do, speak: and further, *and this is my principal claim*, that we can give a partial *Translation of our Works* into Words which will assist understanding.

We are, in fact, all potential poets – most of us in rather a small way, but still appreciators of beauty and *Makers* of word arrangements by which we exchange ideas.

If it be possible, by *Words*, to assist understanding in our Public – and even among ourselves – it is well worth while attempting this. Each of us can, however, be sure of one thing – that to try to explain his Craftsmanship in words, or to put his Intentions into words, will assist his *own* understanding.

V.

With a view to collecting evidence bearing on this idea, I interviewed four of my craftsmen neighbours in Ditchling. Subsequently I wrote out my notes in the form of Statements concerning their work or a particular example of it. These statements were then checked or corrected by the craftsmen.

At first in doubt or mildly sceptical of the idea; after further discussions (the total number of interviews was twelve or thirteen), they seemed to think that there was something in it. They were shy, however, of trying to write specimen Labels, so I myself made suitable summaries of the Statements, etc., which they checked and approved.

The example ‘Statement’ which follows is intended to suggest some of the information which a Craftsman can give about his work. The ‘Labels’ are intended to exemplify the sort of brief and interesting notes which could easily be given in a small Label. Though much more interesting Labels than these could (and, I hope, will) be written.

VI.

MR. PARTRIDGE, a JEWELLER and WORKER in WOOD and METAL, explained the purpose, making, and material of a particular Example of his work, a *Table Reading Lamp Stand* holding an electric bulb and a shade.

This Lamp was designed to stand in the centre of a particular Table in the Craftsman’s home and to light a book, *read comfortably* by a sitter at that table. The stand, to which a ‘flex’ was attached, had to be steady and of the right height, and the angle and position of the Shade and the bulb were planned exactly for that particular table and purpose.

The Stand consists of a five-sided wooden box upholding a central part on which are the bulb and shade attachments. This ‘Box,’ of Siberian pine (which planes well and is free from knots), is five-sided because *this Craftsman thinks “fivesided more interesting than six–and much more interesting than four-sided.”* On each side is fixed a piece of the same wood whose outer side is rounded pillar-wise; between these ‘rounds’ the five angles of the box project, and are emphasised by a narrow fillet of ‘Purpleheart,’ making ridges which give a better grasp. The Base is ‘leaded.’

The five ‘rounds’ are charmingly decorated with marquetry work in a simple pattern suggesting flowers and leaves. The Marquetry is made in four woods, namely: Sycamore (Natural), ‘Blackwood’ (*i.e.* Stained Holly), Mahogany, ‘Greywood’ (*i.e.* Stained Sycamore).

The Marquetry parts are sawn out very freely. Such free sawing besides giving reasonable speed, gives a pleasing natural irregularity and an obvious *key* to the proper position of resembling parts. Black soot was mixed with the glue which squeezes up into the saw-cut between inner and outer parts and into any irregularities in it, giving a pleasing outline which hardens and is polished along with the Marquetry surface. Parts of the Marquetry are effectively diapered or decorated with (*home made*) heated, simple-line punches.

The genesis of the finished shape given to the ‘Box’ of this Lamp Stand is interesting and significant. The craftsman had among his things a suitable piece of iron ‘guttering’, of convenient size, and sufficiently smooth and regular to be used as a tool for pressing and holding Marquetry, till set, on a rounded surface. The possession of this shaped iron led directly to the conception of a ‘stand’ having its sides decorated with columnar slices of Marquetried Wood. (E.J. 2-7 June, 1933).

VIII.

The following specimen LABEL for the Work described I have condensed from the interviews, statements, and discussions. The LABELS are meant to exemplify the sort of brief Statements suitable to accompany such Exhibits. Their size is that of a lady’s visiting card–three by two–and it is suggested that this size might be the ordinary maximum.

A READING LAMP STAND made for a particular Table & a particular Reader (Heights & Positions of its parts, & Angle of the Shade, planned for this).
Made of Siberian Pine (a Wood free from knots) & Marquetried in Sycamore (natural), ‘Blackwood’ (*i.e.* stained Holly), Mahogany, & ‘Greywood’ (*i.e.* stained Sycamore).
*There are 215 separate pieces of wood in the Stand (The Marquetry *plates* amount to 525 pieces).
The five corners of the Stand are each emphasized by a ‘Purpleheart’ (a Brazilian Wood) Fillet which gives a good grip.
The Base is Leaded for steadiness.
E.J.p.p.F.J.P.,7,vi:33.

IX.

To conclude, it is evident that at first there would be difficulties about Labelling, but the enterprising would attempt it. And, of course, it would be optional. Later, when the idea had become more familiar, Craftsmen would become more skilful in making brief definitions.

The general idea of Verbal Explanation might also be carried out in other ways. Framed Broadsheets might be displayed, containing brief explanatory essays on each particular Craft, with diagrams and illustrations. Or such frames could be expanded into shallow case-frames, containing typical Tools and Materials. Tools and Materials might even be grouped in the manner of a demonstration – *e.g.*, Needles, Stuffs, and Threads, illustrating half-finished Embroidery, or an engraving tool in position, as though in the act of cutting a line, in a piece of boxwood.

But at present I attach more importance to the idea of individually *Labelled Exhibits*. If this were permitted, I believe that we could count on obtaining at our next Exhibition a sprinkling of Explanatory Labels sufficient to add definitely to the interest of it.

I hope that you will think this over – *this idea of helping people to see what they are looking at*. And I hope that you may have already found, in my disjointed thoughts and examples, some promise of possibility and value.

ADDENDUM TO PAPER READ BY EDWARD JOHNSTON ON 13TH JUNE, 1933

It had been my intention that one or two of the three photographs shown with this paper should, if it were printed, be reproduced with it. But some of our Council asked me to give instead an Example of my own work and a suitable ‘Explanatory Label’ for it.

I recognise the justice of the request – “Physician heal thyself.” And I have attempted to respond, although my Craft – by its apparently less Substantial and less Useful nature–presents special difficulties in the way of descriptive labelling.

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

The three essential virtues or principles of Formal Penmanship are ‘Sharpness,’ Unity, and Freedom. When embodied in a Manuscript these virtues make themselves felt–to our immediate consciousness–as Explicit Form, and Uniformity and Ease of Writing. An apprehension which goes below these surface appearances will recognise in them the principles underlying all the Crafts.

To achieve sharp and explicit Form the Pen Nib must be sharp-edged and sharp-cornered, and the Ink and the Writing Surface must be suitable. The Writing Surface must be supple and be supported by an Elastic Writing Pad so that the surface adapts itself to meet the Edge of the Nib and to receive the sharply-made–or clean cut–Writing Strokes.

The larger pens used in the example were Steel Nibs (about 3/32 inches wide, and specially ground sharp by myself); the smaller pen was a Turkey’s Quill sharply and finely cut.

The Writing Surface is Vellum (calf skin)the best and most receptive Material for Formal Penmanship. And the hair side, which gives the most perfect surface, is used when the writing is on one side only, as in Broadsheets like the example shown. The Surface is scraped with a sharp knife (by the Scribe) until a fine velvety nap is produced and, either after or before ruling, is pounced with finely powdered resin (gum Sandarach)–both processes promote sharpedged Pen-strokes by repelling the ink from all but the track laid down by the broad nib of the pen.

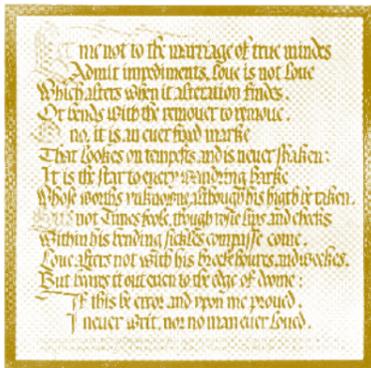
The Dark Brown ‘Ink’ of this manuscript is a mixture of Oxford Ochre (powder) + Gum Water + some Ivory Black (cake) + a little Vermilion (cake). This makes a solid and opaquely-uniform and ‘gritty’ ink (a ‘gritty’ ink gives sharper strokes than a ‘slimy’ ink). The Red ‘ink’ (in the three initial words and in the footnote) is Orange Vermilion (cake) + a little Gum Water. The Writing Pad used was a quire of thick Blotting Paper.

In all my manuscripts my main Intention is to give *Proper Presentation* to the Words, in a form suited to the purpose of the Thing or object which bears them. I think primarily of the *Words-and-the-Thing*. The Appearance of the Thing is an important but secondary consideration.

I study the words and consider their meaning carefully, sometimes for a day or more, before writing them. And I take some pains to get an accurate or good version of the text to be transcribed.

My method is consciously eclectic. The manuscript is deliberately planned and adorned in an attempt to give a faithful and chosen Graphic Presentation of the Words. This is more interesting than simple transcription to the Scribe, and, perhaps, to the Reader also. Though it may be taken as a scribal interference with a given text, I take the risk of its actually being so, or of its being thought so by some readers.

The thing or Object illustrated here was made as a Present for a particular person and occasion. It may be described as a *Square Panel containing Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116 written in Dark Brown and Red, and meant to be hung on a Wall*.



The text of this Sonnet is taken from the Doves Press Edition of “Shake-speares Sonnets” (1909), which is reprinted “from the first edition–1609.”

In the primary intention of giving this Sonnet a proper presentation I marked the (separate Senses of the) three Quatrains by Red Initial Words and inset the (separate Comment of the) final Couplet. The Initial "if" of the Couplet is flourished for several reasons – chiefly it is intended to *separate the Sense* of the Couplet from, and at the same time to attach its Form to, the rest of the Sonnet.

While most of my manuscripts are written in an 'italic' or in a free 'roman' hand, for this manuscript I chose 'black-letter,' partly to convey the sense of an earlier day (although Shakespeare's works were all printed in roman type, I believe), partly to compress the Sonnet's shape laterally, partly for weight and force, and—indirectly – to *delay the reader* (so that each word should sink in), and partly for its rich appearance. Incidentally I reintroduced the long ss of the original (though perhaps the second s of "compasse" may have been round).

The narrow Square Frame (12 by 12 inches) was taken first. It was chosen partly for its own sake and partly to fit the Sonnet. The Sonnet then was made to fit the frame—the manuscript, being frequently tested in the frame during the writing of it.

The Secondary Intention, in the whole treatment of the Thing, was to produce a *richly Decorated Panel complete in itself*—rather than the effect of a piece of writing 'framed' (as it is called) as an afterthought.

To my thinking I have been fairly successful in carrying out my intentions in this Thing. But there is one rather

serious fault – which, however, is not so apparent in the original manuscript, in its brown ink, as in the photograph – the Texture of the manuscript is *too uneven* (e.g., lines 8 and 9 have been too much compressed). An approximately Even Texture is always a virtue in Writing, and, though some latitude may be taken in closely filled Broadsheets, any necessary extra compression is best allowed to happen under compulsion at *the Ends of the lines*. There is also another fault to confess, namely, the omission of a comma after "barke."

Some of the above data are compressed into a suggested 'Label.'

The 'THING': SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 116 written on Vellum —A glazed Panel for Wall Decoration.
NIBS: Steel, ground sharp & Turkey Quill, cut fine.
VELLUM: scraped & 'pounced' to keep Pen-strokes Sharp.
'INKS': Oxford Ochre & Gum & Ivory Black & Vermilion, & Rubrics in Orange Vermilion & Gum.
CHARACTER: Black letter as reminder of Antiquity, and to compress MS. laterally, & for weight & force, &—indirectly—to *delay the reading*, & for its rich appearance. The FRAME was chosen first & the MS. made to fit it. My INTENTION: 1st A proper Graphic Presentation of the WORDS, suited to the 'Thing'; 2nd A Decorated Wall Panel.
COMMENT: I think Intentions fairly fulfilled. But a serious fault is *Uneven Texture* (v. lines 8, 9). E.J.H.lil.14

* "PAPER READ BY EDWARD JOHNSTON ON 13TH JUNE, 1933, AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITION SOCIETY, AT 6, QUEEN SQUARE, W.C.1. NOTE.—THE ORIGINAL PAPER HAS BEEN ABBREVIATED (BY ABOUT ONE QUARTER). PART V HAS BEEN PARTLY REWRITTEN TO EXPLAIN BETTER THE NOTES AND EXAMPLES (VI TO X)."

COLOPHON

#03

ARTIST

ZAKŁADY NA ŻYCIE (PLANT-LIFE)

JAMES BECKETT

'Zakłady na Życie' (Plant-Life) is a museum environment exploring Poland's industrial past. A plant can be as much a photosynthetic organism as a factory, power-station, or other large industrial complex. It is in this sense the piece attempts to achieve as much as state of David Attenborough as it does anthropological glance into the life of factories across Poland.

Using relics gathered from both functioning factories and industrial ruins around the country, the installation* is based on a workers health and safety display, found in a power station in Łódź. The experience allows one to zoom-in, from the larger level of infrastructure, down to the single product of the factory itself, such as a toothbrush. The tangible nature of this experience attempts to connect to histories through these found objects, in much the way a museum does with its artifacts of purported significance.

With commemorative documents and workers' items as evidence, the fringe economy of the East reveals itself as a true giant, - manifest in the factories of chocolate, speedometers, cement and canned meat.

* THE MUSEUM ENVIRONMENT IS ONE OF THREE STAGES, PART OF AN HOUR-LONG PERFORMANCE STARRING ZBIGNIEW MACIAK. THE SHOW WILL PREMIERE ON THE 20TH OF MAY AT HUIS A/D WERF UTRECHT.

TEXT

WILL HOLDER

DESIGN

LESLEY MOORE

BOOKLET TRANSLATIONS FROM POLISH

ADAM ETMAŃSKI

PRINTING

J.BOUT & ZONEN

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THANKS

DIENST KUNST & CULTUUR, MUNICIPALITY OF ROTTERDAM, FESTIVAL A/D WERF UTRECHT

FESTIVAL:WERF

AND SPECIAL THANKS

RENÉE COPRAIJ, KOEN NUTTERS, LUCAS STEENHUIS, ERIK JANSEN, COOSJE IDHUNA KUIPERS, GUIDO BESSELINK, COBIE DE VOS, JAN WILLEM VAN DER VLIES, CORALIE DEN ADEL, LIMKE KWAKKEL, IZABELA OŁDAK, ZBIGNIEW MACIAK, BŁAŻEJ FILANOWSKI, MAREK GLINKOWSKI, MARCIN DOS, PAWEŁ JUSTYNA, EWA CIECHANOWSKA.

DISTRIBUTION

WILFRIED LENTZ ROTTERDAM
LÜTTGENMEIJER, BERLIN
CASTILLO/CORRALES, PARIS
PRO QM, BERLIN
BOEKIE WOOKIE, AMSTERDAM
FESTIVAL A/D WERF, UTRECHT

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POSTER IMAGE

EITHER MIECZYSLAW KOŁODZIEJ,
OR ADAM BOGUSZ,
IMAGE TAKE AT ZAKŁADY AZOTOWE
(PLANT/TERRAIN AZOTOWE) CIR. 1970

#3 ZAKŁADY NA ŻYCIE (PLANT-LIFE)

IS THE THIRD ISSUE OF A NEW SERIES OF PUBLICATIONS ISSUED BY WILFRIED LENTZ ROTTERDAM AND COPUBLISHED WITH FESTIVAL A/D WERF AND LÜTTGENMEIJER.

Published as an accompaniment to a show of the same title from 13 February to 24 April 2010 at Wilfried Lentz Gallery and a performance from May 20-29, 2010 at Festival a/d Werf, Utrecht. Parts of the installation will be shown at Liste Basel June 14-20, 2010 by Wilfried Lentz and at Frieze Art Fair, London October 14-17, 2010 by Lüttgenmeijer.

With this publication is a signed and numbered artist edition of James Beckett (500 copies). With the performance and the artfairs another 750 copies are published though unsigned.