



BARTLEBY REVIEW

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Hooks David Morris

Urs Bechdel

'Hook'

OUTPOST

10b Wensum Street

Through July 21

Urs Bechdel's career is predicated on a single artwork, *Hook* (1992-ongoing). This is the first work he exhibited as a graduate student in Zurich in the early nineties, and same the work that lined the walls at Norwich's OUTPOST gallery in July 2014, a row of nine identical metal hooks. The hooks are angular and small—a strip of metal a centimetre wide attached to the wall by two screws—a machine-extruded "L" with a straight-line serif flourish.

Bechdel is an artist made by hooks. In as much as the hooks are to be used, Bechdel is a social sculpture who makes social sculptures; or, to put it another way, Bechdel is and makes sculptures to be used by people. At the time of writing, Urs Bechdel consists of a young Swiss artist, an old Swiss artist, two middle-aged German artists, eight UK-based curators, a handful of textual supports, conversations and now the present publication.

The hooks are useful, functional items, but the function is fiction: after all, what is more useless than a hook in an art gallery? Yet the artist makes clear that the use-value of these objects is “real,” pushing out past the gallery walls and into the bathroom, the office and the kitchen and remain there even now, long after the gallery hooks have been taken down. They are cheap, utilitarian objects.¹ People hang things from them.

To an overworked culture, Bechdel’s non-production is offered as a gift—for the artist (easy to do), the institutional hosts (easy to install) and the audience (easy to enjoy or dismiss). Without the need to develop new work, the withdrawal is also a shortcut to immortality: Bechdel exists outside time, forever young. In the same breath the press release alludes to Kenneth Goldsmith’s “retypings” and Melville’s *Bartleby*, “as if to say: ‘I would prefer not to, but if you insist, here is the same and the same and the same again.’”

Here, the surrounding situation matters much more than the relative “reality” of the hooks. Like football, or the stock market, or chess, the invention or “fiction” of the game bears no relation to how it works, how you play it. Bechdel’s “game” is an open secret, 95% fiction and 95% real life.² The simplicity of strips of folded metal with a practical use belies a complicated network of interpersonal exchange, hearsay and misinformation. According to third-hand rumours I have heard, Bechdel is “a fake,” “some Swiss artist” or “a bit of an arsehole,” all of which

is true. But there is no joke, it doesn’t matter if you get it, and there will be no punchline.

In the past the artist has claimed to donate a percentage of his earnings to support female conceptual artists, but this is framed both as a response to the gender pay gap and, as stated in his interview with OUTPOST curator Amy Leach, “just one way to hook up girls.” In this way, Bechdel’s hooks are a means of persona construction: like many males of his generation, the personality “Urs Bechdel” has been forged through irony and humour, tools which operate to subvert certain expectations of the artist, but also, perhaps, to obscure the very real privileges and power dynamics of working from this particular position. Hence Bechdel’s refusal with *Hook* is even more far-reaching, nothing less than a refusal of the ordinary responsibilities and qualities of being a person. He is an artist as blank and open as his work, a means to test a position or have a conversation, a projection screen: “I learned to be what they want me to be. Today I’m happy if you look into my eyes and what you see is just a hook.” He is a utilitarian artist. People hang things from him.

David Morris

¹ The 2014 price is 38 Swiss Francs, but “linked” to the artist’s age, and will increase exponentially.

² In the sense that writer Jerry Pinto has recently described his own work, ‘95% non-fiction and 95% fiction’ (BBC Radio 4, 30 August 2014).