

Interview

Ben Kinmont

by Ross Simonini



“If you follow through with what I’m doing, art would cease to exist. But it’s not possible, because we are human”

fan@airdeparis.com



The artist Ben Kinmont lives in the centre of Sebastopol, a bucolic village in the wine country of California. His home is a farmhouse across the street from the local high school, which his children both attended. He works behind the house in a garage that has been converted into an impressive library with high ceilings, custom-made bookcases and a spiral staircase rising up to a loft. This is where he runs his business as an antiquarian bookseller, which he began in 1998 while living in Lower Manhattan, and which doubles as an ongoing conceptual project that he calls *Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family*.

Kinmont treats the economic act of inhabiting a profession as a kind of object. He doesn't talk to fellow booksellers about the conceptual nature of the project. He wants to be considered sincere in his approach to the subject, and he is. His focus is on fifteenth-to-early-nineteenth-century gastronomic books (food, wine, diets, agriculture, the history of taste, etc). He regularly attends rare-book fairs and auctions; he briefly ran a storefront in a nearby shopping centre; and he's been on the cover of the local weekly newspaper. As the world sees it, he's just making a living.

In this way, Kinmont is working alongside artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles or David Levine, who have seamlessly folded basic labour into their practice. Many of Kinmont's projects involve man-on-the-street conversations with strangers. For his work at Documenta 11 in 2002, *Moveable type no Documenta*, he created a mobile one-man printing press, asked ten Kassel

residents about their engagement with art, then printed the talk and distributed it in town. It's a simple act that, for him, questions the necessity of Documenta itself. The small act of conversational activism resists the institutional structure he is working within, and he has enacted similar quiet protests at the Whitney Biennial in New York (2014), the ICA, London (2004), and the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2009).

In dialogue, Kinmont's work frequently takes the form of curating, archiving and publishing. Often this is done through pamphlets and ephemera printed by his Antinomian Press, which is modelled after French Revolutionary broadsides and takes its name from a group of mid-seventeenth-century radicals that were accused of anarchy. His most recent project is a poetic anti-Trump advertisement in the National News sections of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. On 7 September of this year, before the midterm elections, he ran a black square with the title '20 January 2017', the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, alongside the statement 'will you look to yourself / to find the body politic?' He considers the act to be in the tradition of Vietnam-era antiwar ads.

I met with Kinmont in Sebastopol a few weeks before the ads ran. Fourteen years after he relocated from New York City to Sebastopol, I had made the same move, and soon after I began hearing about the 'conceptual artist down the road'. Ben and I spoke in his library. After-

Shhhh..., 2002–03 (installation view, Whitney Biennial, New York, 2014). Photo: Andres Ramirez

ward, he introduced me to his family and we ate a delicious meal at one of the best restaurants in town.

ROSS SIMONINI *Were you heavily involved in the New York artworld before you left?*

BEN KINMONT Very much. I spent 17 years in New York. I was working with two galleries there and a few in Europe. Then, starting in 1989 – I was twenty-six at this time – I started making works in the street. But this is before terms like 'project art' and 'social practice'. For me, it all came out of the idea of Joseph Beuys's social sculpture and a generally ambivalent feeling toward the artworld.

RS *How did this first manifest?*

BK The first important project on the street was *I am for you* [begun in 1990], which I did in New York and Cologne. I was laying down the premises of how I viewed my work, the syntax for it. I wanted to have discussions with people about it, but not people in the artworld. It occurred four times in each city. It would be myself and three participants and we'd hand out texts, leaflets, and talk about them. We spoke to 11,750 people over four years.

RS *What did you ask them?*

BK There were three ideas. One was a summary of Beuys's idea of social sculpture, and we'd ask: do they think it's bullshit? Do they think it's interesting? Relevant? Then there was the idea of the 'thinking sculpture'. I wrote my American Studies undergraduate thesis on William James's



ideas, especially about pragmatism: how do you receive stimuli and shape that into ideas? About the truth-making process. And, in Beuysian terms, I realised that one could view that as a kind of sculptural activity, so I called this 'the thinking sculpture'. And the third idea came out of [Ludwig] Wittgenstein and [Jacques] Derrida's writings about the impossibility of language, which were in the air during school. But instead of viewing it as a void, or something that made communication impossible, I saw it as what made things possible. I called that the 'third sculpture'. It's the notion of spaces in-between – between people, cultures, ideas. I wanted to think of that space as sculptural space.

RS *Like negative space?*

BK Yes, but interestingly, the moment a space becomes identified, it itself becomes a point, a positive space, thus creating additional spaces in-between. So 'third sculpture' becomes a kind of verb. It is always in motion and these terms helped me create a form of syntax for my practice. I saw social sculpture as 'we', the thinking sculpture as 'I' and the third sculpture as what was between them. So when I'm doing projects in the street, there's never a moment or single object that is the piece. It was all coming out of the third sculpture, and it was constantly changing. Then the archives of these projects became the maps of the work.

RS *You've become an archivist.*

BK I was always a bibliophile and I always liked other artists' archives. I like to blur the boundaries between special collections, rare books, archival institutions, exhibitions and sculpture. I think of books and ephemera as sculpture, and objects in museums as things to be read, and that have use value, the way text does.

RS *What kind of use value?*

BK In the sense that they can be points of reference for one's identity and value structure. Like, when you collect things, artworks have meaning. For example, I'm in the process of framing some ephemera and broadsides by other artists [including Bas Jan Ader, Ian Wilson and a Dada papillon] and it's really nice to have them around me again. I haven't seen them in a long time, and they help to clarify the discourse in my mind and what I want to do with future projects.

RS *You started off painting and sculpting and making objects, but eventually stopped. What happened?*

Moveable type no Documenta, 2002, conversation and printing with Jutta Krug's class 111b, Reformschule, Kassel, for Documenta 11, 2002. © the artist

BK The projects on the street and the painting overlapped for several years. I love painting, but what became urgent changed for me. I started a family. The whole notion of precarity became more pronounced. The issues that were already there became bigger. So in

1995 I left my galleries, and I started publishing things and curating at the same time. I curated *The Materialization of life into alternative economies* [first shown at Printed Matter Bookstore, New York, 1996] – by which I meant, alternative to the gallery system. This was a reconsideration of Lucy Lippard's dematerialisation of art. So, instead of dematerialising art, I framed those artists as materialising life through different notions of exchange and value.

RS *Your project On becoming something else [begun 2000, exhibited at Centre Pompidou in 2009 and SFMOMA in 2013] seems to be another curatorial show that has helped to define your own work.*

BK What happened there is, I started teaching at California College of the Arts in 2003 and helped to create the Social Practices programme there. As I taught there, many students were coming to the end of their studies and were moving toward things that weren't art. But they weren't just saying 'fuck the artworld'. It was the content of their work that led them into other fields, to, say, becoming a doctor, as one of my students did. But some struggled with this. They didn't know how to tell their parents that they weren't using their art degree to be



I am for you (detail), 1990, performance views on New York's Prince and Broadway,
Court and Joralemon, Thompson between
Spring and Prince, 5th Avenue and 57th Street. © the artist

all images Courtesy Air de Paris

an artist, or how to deal with the art-school debt. So I realised that there's a history of artists doing this, of leaving the artworld, but we don't hear about it, because history is written by those who survive and remain. So those who depart are not included in the stories. And that project [*On becoming something else*] was about me finding artists who left – permanently or briefly – and writing down their histories. I wanted to say to my students 'you're not alone'. And I believe that the reasons those people left are informative. The artworld couldn't contain them. And in some ways, I did it for me, to remind myself that I wasn't alone.

RS *And you've done this with your bookselling business, which you treat as an ongoing project, to be put alongside your other projects.*

BK Yeah, it started in 1998 and the very first book catalogue I put out announces the title of the artwork. But unlike the alternative economies I talked about before, I wanted this to be a viable, long-term thing. It would be meaningful to me as a project *only* if I really did support my family. So I waited four years before I presented it to the artworld, to make sure it really worked. And I did this by making a broadside that would function truly both in the antiquarian book fairs, and also in a gallery as a piece of art. I wanted that bilingualism of the two systems. So almost nobody in the book world knows I'm an artist. I'm just now becoming more open about discussing it. It's almost counterproductive if they know.

RS *They might consider your whole business as a farce.*

BK Well, there is very little interest in contemporary art in the antiquarian book world. But, in what I'm doing, there are connections between the two practices, in the subject matter. As an artist, I value the decentralisation of art and a shift to things outside of the institution. And my activity as a bookseller is also a way to do that. Within library special collections, food and wine was not taken seriously because it's related to private lives and frivolity. It's not like the history of science or literature, which have always been subjects that institutions collect. So as a dealer in this material you have to get people to wrap their heads around the value of domesticity, of buying a cookbook by a woman in eighteenth-century England, as opposed to Jane Austen.

RS *You live in a place that values that industry.*

BK And yet there's no great institutional collection of gastronomy west of the Mississippi. Really, I moved here because I'm from here. I went to high school here, in Sonoma.

RS *But it's also very much outside the artworld centres. Has the move been partly about decentralising that artworld power?*

BK Yes. The piece for Documenta was partly about decentralisation. I was thinking about conceptual art and how publications could become exhibitions and the current moment, where everyone can become their own publisher with computer technology. All of this is very radical in my mind. So what I did in Kassel is, I carried a portable printer, reams of paper and a laptop in my backpack. I went around and asked strangers if they wanted to participate and then I asked them a series of questions: what is the most meaningful thing in your life? Could that meaningful thing in your life be understood as art? Should it be understood as art? And what's the difference between that meaningful thing and the experience in a museum? Then I printed and distributed a summary of their responses (in both English and German) as flyers in the neighbourhood in which I had the conversation. I did each

“What is the most meaningful thing in your life? Could that meaningful thing in your life be understood as art? Should it be understood as art? And what's the difference between that meaningful thing and the experience in a museum?”

conversation all in one day, and I did it ten times – over ten days. I thought of them as a kind of group show. And for me, if we're at the point where we can do this, it begs the question, why do we have things like Documenta? All of this meaningful stuff is happening all the time around us anyway. So, for people who leave this artworld centre, they value that which happens outside the official discourse. They value noncentralised places. And that's how it was for me. And I think that's why a lot of people leave.

RS *What's the endgame with your work? Do you want art to cease to exist?*

BK I think it's true that if you follow through with what I'm doing, art would cease to exist. But it's not possible, because we are human. I think we continue to make art because we are flawed. Our flawed nature creates urgency and whenever there's urgency, there's the need for art. And I mean real urgency, like: do I exist? How do I understand? What am I experiencing?

RS *For you, it seems that art is synonymous with the artworld rather than 'art' as a philosophical category.*

BK Well, I tend to use the word in these terms: the idea of art, what it represents, how it is understood in media, in the classroom. It's not just about the creative impulse. The institutions are part of it, but I want to make clear that I think these institutions also have a role to play in the precarity around artists. Although I ask a lot of institutions when I work with them, I also work really hard to work *with* them. For my archives, I inventory and catalogue every single object to make it easier for the registrars at institutions. This is a big deal, because the archives are handled during exhibition and museums are terrified of things being stolen or destroyed. So I critique the institution, but I also work hard to create new solutions that they can move toward. How do you include a different audience? How do you reconsider an exhibition? For the Whitney Biennial in 2014, I invited families to have a conversation amongst themselves. They told me the date and the name of their family, and I made a print in an edition of two, one for the family and one for the project archive. But the family kept the topic of the conversation private. So, for the family, the print became an aide-memoire for a private conversation they had, but to everyone else it's just a print with the family's name and a date. An artwork that is a closed door.

RS *What about the endgame of your own work? How does providing a living for your family end? Death?*

BK This is the most difficult project I've ever done – the duration and commitment needed. But it's a full circle, really. This piece came directly out of that first piece, *I am for you*, from conversations I had with people on the street. I wanted to deal directly with sustainability – how to maintain a practice independent of the gallery system. It's about one of the real big topics. Everyone is trying to support themselves.

RS *Are you actively seeking out new exhibitions these days?*

BK No, it's more passive for me and the pace that's happening these days is just fine by me. I think, when you leave New York, you have to define for yourself what success is. I don't talk to people around here about my work. It's not about a rapid exhibition schedule any more. It's about me being able to look at something I'm doing, but slowly. That might be because I'm fifty-four now. It could be because I think about death more. But I feel like being away from New York allows me to create my own ecosystem. It can just happen.

Ross Simonini is an artist and writer living in New York and California