

From: Michael Blum
To: Francis Kochert
Date: Mon, 13 Dec 2004 11:11
Subject: la dernière brève

Dear Francis,

To begin with, I would like to thank you for taking the risk of accepting this collaboration and allowing the project to get off the ground.

Now, six months on, I would like to go over with you how it went so that we can, maybe not draw up an assessment, but at least compare notes, confront and adjust our perspectives.

I know you have already worked with artists in the past, but what makes this collaboration different is that the product is more or less invisible, blending in with the actual newspaper material. What was your initial reaction, when Corinne first presented the project to you? And later on, when you committed yourself to it, what were your motivations, and what were your reservations?

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From: Francis Kochert
To: Michael Blum
Date: Mon, 13 Dec 2004 15:50
Subject: Re: la dernière brève

Hi Michael

I am only too happy to answer your questions.

When Corinne contacted me, I had only just taken over management of the magazine department after seven years as an international and national reporter. Although my initial background training was in the field of culture – I started out in the trade among other things doing pieces for *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, was a member of the International Art Critics' association, teaching in communications – I have always taken an interest in contemporary creative work of every kind. So I have if anything a favourable bias towards subjects dealing with current art. At a time when I had just brought out a number of papers on the launch of the Pompidou Centre in Metz and its Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, and on the impending opening of the FRAC Lorraine premises, it seemed natural for me to look at Corinne's proposal for a media project being conducted at the contemporary art laboratory which is the Synagogue de Delme.

I remember somewhat putting the brakes on her enthusiasm and certainties over the experiment you were planning to conduct. Because a daily newspaper, a regional one at that, does not necessarily have a calling to serve as a medium for artistic experiments or performances, but rather to report on them. Even specialist periodicals like *Art Press* do not open up their columns to this kind of practice. Only *Liberation* has, very occasionally and formally opened up its columns to Starck or Tapiès as invited artists to intervene in an understandable way on the overall content.

I was willing to hold a meeting with you to try and clarify your project. I made it quite clear to you then that neither my chief editor nor my general manager were very keen on the operation, as they failed to see what purpose it could serve or what use it would be for our readers. And the general news editor was completely sceptical, fearing the pieces might double up with current news items pouring in each day from around the world through the hundreds and even thousands of stories on some of the strangest topics. Being also in charge of the surface of the general news pages, he was in no mind to cut the space, which was tight enough as it was, to publish even short news items to the detriment of coverage of burning international issues, never knowing what might turn up from one day to the next. Also, he objected that this project had no editorial visibility for readers, no identification mark, as readers had not been forewarned – which is how you wished it to be in your approach.

I was however taken with the idea of using the general news pages, and also the sports pages and magazine section for short news items with a difference, out of synch, from all over the world, especially following the Oulipian alphabetical constraint you suggested to me just before we began publishing. We also agreed that these short pieces should be just that. Once the operation was launched, while there was no question of not seeing it through to the end, we soon discovered it had certain limits. The first and basically the most damaging one was that all these 'brèves' were fundamentally no different from the wire stories we receive every day from the press agencies. I think it would have been necessary to browse the Net more thoroughly and come up with some really different, offbeat news that no-one else publishes. Or maybe this just means that MacLuhan's global village is with us already. We may also wonder at the actual impact of news from far away on such trivial matters for readers whose main reason for buying the paper as we know is the local news. A chestnut.

There were also a number of glitches during the operation. In particular, you neglected sporting news items. Your forced absence, which you could do nothing about, for a family bereavement, kept you away in Austria for nearly a week out of the four weeks of the operation and, in addition to the acrobatics of finding topics and sending emails, obliged us to

postpone the public meeting at which we were supposed to see each other to take stock in the context of your residence. Then I had to leave on a trip to Vietnam, I had trouble seeing the operation through to the end during the last week, after I had been monitoring it closely on a day-to-day basis, and it missed a day while I was away. There was also a problem with the letter 'X' for which it was hard to find a solution short of cheating slightly or making up a subject, which was not the idea and would have been journalistically unethical. Also, towards the end of the operation the general news editor was becoming more and more unwilling to print the last of the 'brèves.'

With hindsight, I do think it would have been better to inform readers from the outset, give them a few hints, whereas as it turned out the project was totally 'illegible.' What can we make of it, except to say that a performance artist has taken a press medium and, without being a journalist, has been picking and choosing a few stories published in the international press and has drawn out at random some anecdotal events that might otherwise have been passed over and gone unnoticed by our readers (like millions of others every day). I personally did not get the feeling I was taking part in some artistic effort but that I was doing the work of a journalist for my press outlet, with the worry of having to publish news items that were hard to check out. Having said that, we don't claim to cross-check every news story that comes in to us each day from the world's press agencies!

Six months on, I still have mixed feelings. I was much more deeply touched by the description and artistic impact of your earlier performances. Naturally I remain willing to carry on this discussion with you about how you view the project.

Best regards

Francis Kochert

From: Michael Blum
Date: Tue, 14 December 2004 00:25
To: Francis Kochert
Subject: Re: Re: la dernière brève

Dear Francis,

I was delighted to hear from you, as this has been my first chance to find out exactly how you thought the project had gone.

So I was interested to read your reservations, many of which strike me as arising from the invisible or indecipherable nature of my intervention. In my view, the problem lies not so much in its being indecipherable as such as in the lack of any go-between which would make it decipherable. I would readily accept that my desire not to announce or identify my short news items did not help in the way they were received. But identifying them, I feel, would only have thrown discredit on them by setting them apart as 'artistic', meaning fanciful and inconsequential. For me the relevance of these 'brèves' lies in the questioning of the editorial choices that they lead to.

In addition to this lack of mediation with regard to the reader, do you not think the same is true with regard to the journalists? Corinne's initial proposal to arrange for a meeting with the journalists, I think, might have helped to reach a mutual understanding between the way I go about things and the way the newspaper operates, and bring more communication to the project (naively, I would say: are we not also talking about an exchange, with both parties learning from the other?). In departing from my artist's role identifiable as such (i.e. my ivory tower) and taking the place of the journalist, of course I was a sitting target for criticism from professional journalists. My idea was to become involved within the newspaper, not just to occupy a space, however great the freedom I had. It was not a matter of gaining legitimacy from the paper, but of using it as my material. I was not interested in using the newspaper page as a platform for advertising myself, but I was interested in making editorial choices, however small. People can always tax me with the laughable scale of my work and the insignificance of my choices. Of course I should have liked to work on a more ambitious scale, decide for instance the content of the articles and not just write up a 'brève.' But I still don't know of a paper that would be ready to give an artist that kind of power!

From my standpoint, with the possible exception of the first few, my 'brèves' cannot be boiled down to strange-but-true items from the AFP. What I see is rather a very select field that gets press coverage (Iraq, Near East - even if we may criticize the nature of this cover) and a whole lot of countries we never hear about at all. While one has got

to admit that a fire at a Trinidad fast-food restaurant or increased taxi fares in Jamaica are devoid of interest for a reader in Lorraine (apart, precisely, from this total lack of interest!), it at least reminds him that these countries do actually exist - although dramatically absent from our media landscape. And when a country does get coverage it is always from the same angle - like Israel, where only war-related news reaches the reader. That is why I wanted to write a 'brève' on road accidents in Israel, to show that there are ways of dying there other than by being blown up in a bus - which was my way of countering the flourishing security-based rhetoric and reminding people that more people are killed on the roads in Israel than by the Intifada. Unfortunately my intention was defused, as if talking about Israel, in this case other than in the usual way, was something too serious. The title "ISRAEL: INSÉCURITÉ ROUTIÈRE" was edited into "INSÉCURITÉ... ROUTIÈRE," dropping the word "ISRAEL," which gave the story its whole meaning.'

My reason for going into some detail like this is to lay claim to a little leeway within the constraints imposed by our agreement. I should also tell you that it was far from being a linear process. First, I learned, read, searched, looked, browsed, and tested limits (cuts, rewrites). Then, once I had learned the ropes a little, I allowed myself to indulge in more freedom or irony, for instance. The fact that I only wrote two pieces for the sports section is something I also put down to experience. The first one reported the disastrous results of the Djibouti football team in the Central and Eastern Africa Cup for clubs. The second was on the Everest marathon. Now, for no apparent reason, this last story was completely rewritten by the sports department. So I decided I was not writing for the sports section any more. This was a rather impulsive decision, but at the time I felt it was the right one, I had a point to make.

You mention the slight mix-up at the end, starting with publication of the X story and your leaving for Vietnam. Looking back, I see it as being the unavoidable and even necessary breakdown of the whole enterprise. The day my 'brève' with the X ('Shalom Xanax') was to come out, the last one was not by me and reported on a boating accident on the Danube in Vienna, which of course I took for a rather unpleasant personal message! But having no dialogue with the editors, and with you my contact person no longer around, I had to just read between the lines...

The possibility of including a fiction for the X (the Oulipian principle linking the frequency of a letter to the range of choices) finally gave us a chance to get down to the bare essentials of this confrontation of the logic behind running a

daily newspaper and the logic behind an artistic approach. My work falls within the paper operation whose limits and taboos I respect, but part of my role is also to test limits. Apart from meeting the Oulipian 'clinamen' constraint, including a made-up piece as one of the 26 'brèves' reporting actual facts was for me a way of trying to see if there was at least one reader scrupulous enough to check the story out... So I must own up today to having, just this once, made up a story (the "Shalom Xanax" album might well raise a laugh from Kinky Friedman but no such album ever existed) based on two completely unrelated facts (the 40th anniversary of the twinning of Oaxaca with Palo Alto and Kinky Friedman's biographical details). So here we have something unquestionably different from the strange-but-true stories from the AFP... Has this being slightly economical with ethical journalism drawn any reactions from readers? Is there such a person as an ideal reader who checks everything?

With hindsight, what do you think of our economic relationship? I worked for you without you either choosing me or paying me... pretty strange as economic relationships go, but true...

Best regards,
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1. Translator's note: the French words 'sécurité' and 'insécurité' cover both 'security' (or absence thereof) in the streets and (lack of) 'safety' on the roads.