Nika Kupyrova
Matrikelnummer: 1374033

Thinking about artists

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Univ. Lekt. Mag. Dr. phil. Franz Rainer Thalmair

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"Maybe the belief that an appropriation is always a conscious strategic decision made by an author is as naïve as believing in a "original" author in the first place"[1]

Within the art context and during my studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, I found it fairly common for professors, curators and peers to recommend me to look at the work of certain known artists in relation to my own artistic practice. I have kept a list of recommendations I received over the years and have currently selected five artistic strategies to address over the course of this project.

While the final installation looks deceivingly homogenous it actually comprises of five individual works titled accordingly *Thinking about Constantin Brancusi*, *Thinking about Sarah Lucas*, *Thinking about Richard Tuttle*, *Thinking about Anselm Kiefer* and *Thinking about Isa Genzken*.

What attracts me most is the multifacetedness of a recommendation: the implications of it both to the giver (a sight of erudition, artistic camaraderie, concerns over plagiarism) and the receiver (an acknowledgement of artistic ability, a hopeful push in the right direction, veiled criticism and so many others). It proposes such a wide array of 'discoursable' topics that I won't even attempt to cover that much ground – rather I will try to intimate some of the directions that touch on the aspects of my work that I find beneficial both for this discussion and for the understanding of my practice on the whole.

"If a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of 'art'."[2]

In my current context of the University of Applied Art Vienna I would hardly describe my gesture as radical – rather it has a flavour of doing as one is told, of accepting a proposed mentorship. The selection of artists I've chosen to address also speaks to this end – recognizable, established names have all been approved by art media attention and continuous institutional exposé, while the quality of my own artwork is yet to be decided. It adds the level of mentorship to my interaction with their work, while using similar approach to the work my colleagues would be closer to (alas, involuntary) collaboration.

There is another quality to the selection that I would like to point out: due to their high art-world status the works of all aforementioned artists are mainly known to me through digital reproductions. The prevalence of these reproductions in my surrounding reinforces the cult status of their prototypes as well as my wish to give them physical form. With a similar gesture, the British artist Mark Leckey gives physical reality to the contents of his hard drive in his exhibition *UniAddDumThs*

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[1] Pichler, Michalis. Statements on Appropriation. *Fillip #11* (2010) p.44

[2] Graham, Dan. My Works for Magazine Pages: "A History of Conceptual Art". In *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (ed.), p.418. The MIT press, 1999

(2015) at Kunsthalle Basel: through locating, printing and replicating he arrives at a series of displays that pay tribute to his curiosity to see the contents of his digital archive as objects in space.

Mark Leckey places artefacts of Samsung and Felix the Cat next to works by Jeff Koons and Henry Moore, claiming their equal cultural significance and allure, poignant especially now that the ways we consume them are essentially identical. For all that, I do not see his position as critical, but immersive – looking for self-realisation through absorbing these artefacts into his practice.

In her essay about the exhibition Elena Filipovic talks of how Leckey's "longing to posses things… often leads him to reproduce them"[3]. In the "Animal" section of the exhibition *UniAddDumThs* stands a character from Max Ernst's *The Elephant Celebes*, blatantly recognisable, but its original two-dimensional appearance translated unexpectedly into 3D. Meanwhile, a painting by a Renaissance master Piero di Cosimo is a backdrop printed on vinyl, used to set the stage for the other objects. (Fig. 1) This set-up refers not to the originals of the aforementioned works, but to their other existing reproductions – to the jpegs, catalogues and souvenirs. In the institutional context it is an artistic strategy in its own right – to acknowledge that it has long been the copies we have been referring to, when seemingly talking about originals.

"From producer to reproducer"[4]

In *Thinking about artists* the choice of artists does not lie with me – rather it is a result of an adapted method, where I allow others to generate content, leaving me only with the decision on now to approach it. Even if the final selection of five artists is a conscious decision made with an exhibition in mind, it is carried out within the set of contextual restrictions. As such, it does not reflect my taste or preference – at this initial stage it is simply irrelevant.

As I will proceed to discuss the works in detail, personal artistic choices, both aesthetic and conceptual, certainly come into play, but by keeping the point of departure out of my direct control I enjoy a clearly defined playing field that I believe encourages inventiveness in the way wide-open possibilities never could.
Or as Michalis Pichler so flatteringly puts it: "there is as much unpredictable originality of quoting, imitating, transposing, and echoing, as there is in inventing."[5]

Although not a case of direct replication, my approach borrows heavily from the techniques of plagiarism and appropriation and alludes to the gesture of copying which is an extension of these. With the art positions I relay rarely seen through original artworks, but mediated via one medium or another, copying becomes a game of endless replication between media rather than meticulous forgery that is expected.

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[3] Filipovic, Elena. Mark Leckey "UniAddDumThs" 2014–15. *The Artist as Curator*, Issue #8 (2015), p.26
[4] Goldsmith, Kenneth.*Theory*. Paris: Jean Boîte Éditions, 2015, p.7
[5] Pichler, Michalis. Statements on Appropriation. *Fillip #11* (2010) p.44

With different media carrying different connotations, there is a strong narrative embedded in copying. Digital replicas seem to break free from the hierarchy of quality in favour of quantity and accessibility. Meanwhile, they seem to emphasise the status of the handmade, however futile or imprecise may be the gesture. Respectively, questions arise: what is true for the original that is digitally made? And what of the case of found material?

"The two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator"[6]

The specific set-up of this project puts me in the unique position, where I can take on both the role of an artist and a viewer. In Marcel Duchamp's model the spectator completes the artwork through deciphering and interpretation – and yet after engaging with the work per these instructions I go on to become the artist myself. It could be said that this lack of distance I undoubtedly share with many of my contemporaries is a relatively new phenomenon, as web and increasingly digitalised content makes participation easy and matter-of-fact, with modification being a standard interaction mode. Hito Steyerl in his text on the role of the poor-quality images on the web writes how their accessibility "drafts [the users] into participation. Users become editors, critics, translators and co-authors"[7]. Doubly so, because the artist recommendations I have received originate in the perceived similarity between their work and mine. What else could I do but intervene?

A little more on this supposed similarity: through the suggestion that there is a link between the recommended artists' work and mine I am given one of the rare opportunities to gain insight into how my own work is perceived. Similarities point out the differences, laying out the borders of my own work within the pairing and encourage me to find firm ground in my own position. In the end, the recommendation comes full circle, revealing itself to be much more about my own work than that of the recommended artist.

Although I see *Thinking about artists* as an on-going project, the diploma situation encourages a kind of finality – the five works I have produced for an exhibition mark not the end, but a midterm presentation point of the project. Within my contextual restrictions I attempt to communicate my working process with a variety of approaches and methods to arrive at a coherent whole – the effectiveness of which I leave to your judgement as I now proceed to talk about the individual works in detail.

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[6] Duchamp, Marcel. The Creative Act. In *Marcel Duchamp,* Robert Lebel, London: Penguin Books, 1967

[7] Steyerl, Hito. In Defense of the Poor Image*. e-flux journal #10* (2009): 23–45. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/ (Accessed on 7.6.2016)

Thinking about Constantin Brancusi

Brancusi's is an imposing-sounding name, enhanced by its recent re-emergence in the art discourse. Distinctive enough and distant enough historically to encourage re-interpretation, his work was a subject of a fairly recent exhibition *The Brancusi effect* in Kunsthalle Wien, which placed artist's original works alongside their contemporary renderings (Fig. 2). I owe this exhibition one of my first incentives for *Thinking about artists*: I was intrigued by the idea of an artist's style so distinct as to be instantly recognizable even in its re-interpretations and the way in which with historical distance plagiarism becomes reference. I have received the recommendation to look at Brancusi's work shortly afterwards and it still took about a year for the project idea to take shape.

Taking the line of thought inspired by this original motivation I go on to pose a question: how would I make a Brancusi sculpture if I was the one making it?
On one hand there are the noble materials with their meticulous finish: marble, stone, bronze, wood, metal. Their physicality and quality partake in the artist's quest for timelessness and consequently the inherent significance of his sculptures. Much more unusual for Brancusi's time is his studio approach, accountable for his new-gained popularity in the contemporary art scene. Brancusi would photograph his objects in the surrounding of his own studio, assembling and reassembling them into sculptural still-lives or *groupes mobiles* as he called them[8] (Fig. 3). In the essay on the function of artist's studio Daniel Buren sees this studio-centred approach as a radical gesture, claiming that it "thwarted any attempt to disperse [Brancusi's] work, frustrated speculative ventures, and afforded every visitor the same perspective as himself at the moment of creation."[9]

For *Thinking about Constantin Brancusi* I adapt the re-combinable quality that Brancusi's studio arrangements hint at: taking his probably most quoted work *Endless Column* (Fig. 4) I re-imagine it as a true module. Exchanging the noble materials for fibreboard and imitation gold leaf I encourage its interpretation as a replica and accentuate its connotations as a toy, a game: something to assemble at leisure. Expensive materials and large sculptures imply a certain social and financial standing, while I use compactness as an antithesis with objects that I can easily lift, transport and store. Beneath careful execution *Thinking about Constantin Brancusi* hides a distinctive DYI quality – a remark on my own working method.

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[8] Maroci, Roxana. *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010

[9] Buren, Daniel, Repensek, Thomas. *The function of the studio*. The MIT Press, 1979. http://www.jstor.org/stable/778628 (Accessed on 7.6.2016)

Thinking about Sarah Lucas

Thinking about Sarah Lucas is an attempt to re-kindle the affinity I felt for the artist's work in my early 20s, fascinated with its grotesqueness and abject humour. Although my interests now lie elsewhere I try to trace my steps back to find those former connecting points. What still stands out for me is the self-portrait with a cigarette *Fighting Fire with Fire* (Fig. 5). Here is Sarah Lucas at her best: tough, bawdy, funny, provocative; self-ironically macho, self-styled into an artist figure. Apart from its performative and artistic quality, I find it, well, cool.

Always a glamorous smoker, Sarah Lucas permeates her entire artistic career with cigarettes – there are cigarettes as art material, cigarettes as accessory, cigarettes bordering on fetish, cigarettes as a stand-in for the moment of artist contemplation. In the artist's 2015 solo project at the Venice biennale cigarettes reappear as a leading theme, at once comical, sexually suggestive and melancholy. In her video interview about the show she appears with a cigarette, yet it is unclear whether she still smokes or is it a tribute to the exhibition itself.[10] Although an article in The Scotsman on her 2014 exhibition in Tramway tell me "she still smokes a lot, which, ironically, looks more rebellious now than it did 20 years ago"[11].

As I say my own goodbyes to smoking, *Thinking about Sarah Lucas* has a personal, nostalgic touch. Wallpaper based on a pattern of the cigarette filter paper offers a moment of subtle recognition with none of Sarah Lucas' own bawdiness. Inconspicuously installed, it's not even clear whether it is an artwork or not.

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[10] British Council: British Pavilion in Venice. Sarah Lucas, I SCREAM DADDIO - British Pavilion 2015. http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/timeline/2015/type/video/media/sarah-lucas-interview-venice-biennale-2015 (Accessed on 7.6.2016)

[11] Mansfield, Susan. Interview: Sarah Lucas on her shocking artwork. *The Scotsman*, 9.2.2014 http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/art/interview-sarah-lucas-on-her-shocking-artwork-1-3300065

Thinking about Richard Tuttle

Characteristic by their inspiration-driven subtle spontaneity, Richard Tuttle's sculptures are against complexity, against building up a conceptual narrative within the work. Due to Tuttle's disinterest in technical refinement they retain the simplicity and childlike directness of process. He uses the words like metaphysical, poetic, transcendent, he refuses that his works are about anything by themselves. On the other end of this spectrum I find myself to be unspontaneous and meticulous, fuelled by the referential back-and-forth; appropriating and re-interpreting.

The Twenty-Six Series (Fig. 6) comprises of twenty-six objects cast in iron, forming an installation with variable dimensions. Referring to the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, their size and design bring to mind children's learning aids and picture books. In Tuttle's interpretation they loose their writing connotation to become sculptures – there is no alphabet to structure them, nor a method to read them. Even the set-up of the work goes against any discernible order: to install the work Richard Tuttle "flung [the objects] onto the floor, and after they had all been scattered, he further upset any intentional order or "artfulness" in their arrangement by running around the gallery gently kicking the pieces into a haphazard configuration …"[12]

In *Thinking about Richard Tuttle* I attempted to give them back their letter quality – to impose a clear structure and, as usual in children's early reading aids, pair the 'letters' with an appropriate object (A for an Apple). Yet here the method in the pairing is different: the letters no longer stand for the sounds used in speech but only represent their own shape – as such, they are paired with found objects that happen to have a shape that is corresponding.

The arrangement plays off the two-dimensional against the three-dimensional: while the letters, drawn in graphite on a while board, re-assume their written nature, the board also serves as a plinth for objects, emphasizing their three-dimensionality. A layer of glossy varnish brings a secondary level of translation, as it reflects the objects back onto the board.

[12] Tucker, Marcia. *Richard Tuttle.* New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976. https://archive.org/stream/richardtuttle00tutt/richardtuttle00tutt_djvu.txt (Accessed on 7.6.2016)

Thinking about Anselm Kiefer

This was a challenging correlation for me and, probably, the most difficult dialogue to establish – but as per nature of this project I have to engage with the recommendations that I receive. Rooted as they are in political and mythological narration, heavily textural and heavily symbolic, Anselm Kiefer's works place me firmly in the position of the viewer, passivity imposed by the awareness of my very different artistic agenda. My understanding is that the recommendation was made not because of the content of Anselm Kiefer's works, but because of his process and use of materials – and there is plenty of that.

For *Thinking about Anselm Kiefer* I decided to focus not on the specific work, but on the portrait of the artist in his studio, as seen in the documentary film *Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow* by Sophie Fiennes (Fig. 7). Anselm Kiefer's 350.000 m^2 studio complex in Barjac, France is a merge of an artwork, an artist studio and artist persona in one. As in the film review by Peter Bradshaw: "Building almost from the ground up in a derelict silk factory, Kiefer devised an artistic project extending over acres: miles of corridors, huge studio spaces with ambitious landscape paintings and sculptures that correspond to monumental constructions in the surrounding woodland, and serpentine excavated labyrinths with great earthy columns that resemble stalagmites or termite mounds"[13]

Within this manufactured post-apocalyptic landscape Anselm Kiefer stands out as an artist figure in its classical sense: with maximalism of scale and gesture, responsiveness of the environment taken for granted and a team of assistants to realize his vision with him. Raw, natural materials handled in the way as to make their physicality apparent emphasise the mythology of the process and the singularity of each work.

In my interpretation I intentionally act against this formula: a found photograph of the cave, coincidentally reminiscent of the Barjac studio aesthetics is scanned and digitally printed onto a carpet. There is no handwork, no discernible materials – the content is appropriated and re-contextualised, in its digital form endlessly reproducible. The artwork's position is also telling: half on the floor, half on the wall, the hanging emphasizes the flatness of the medium, its multifunctionality and mundaneness. No longer a painting, yet not quite a carpet, in the grey area between fine and applied art.

[13] Bradshaw, Peter. Over Your Cities Grass Will Grow. *Guardian*. 16.5.2010. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/may/16/over-your-cities-grass-will-grow (Accessed on 7.6.2016)

Thinking about Isa Genzken

In his series of notes on internet and art Gene McHugh describes an artwork *Ancient Artifacts* by Brad Tinmouth: four photographs of mass-produced statues of "Pharaoh", "Buddha", "Cat Goddess" and "Krischna", covered by the artist with a layer of transparent resin. He argues that they can be seen as:

"1. Mass-produced objects, which are the synthetic versions of once-unique objects (appropriated kitsch gods).
2. As well as a series of unique objects in their own right (the serial mutations of appropriated kitsch gods).
Each work's totemic power resides here, then, not in either (1.) not in (2.), but rather in the oscillation between (1.) not in (2.), from original to version to original to version and back again."[14]

With a similar recipe in mind I look at Isa Genzken's use of mass-produced objects: while there are few alterations in the objects themselves they are given very specific roles in her arrangements, carrying at once the connotations of their original function and their attributed sculptural definition. She often comes back to a subject of bouquet, usually topping a plinth-like construction – the flowers are in bold disarray, supplemented with tape and spray paint, all materials cheap, recognizable and flamboyant (Fig. 8).

For this last piece I come back to the subject of original and copy, discussed in the beginning of this essay and one of the recurring themes in my work. In my interpretation Isa Genzken's bouquet becomes a single plastic rose, supposedly an unspectacular mass-produced replica as easily acquired as it is neglected. Apart from the fact that from its epoxy-cast stem to the barcode drawn in pencil, the flower is actually hand-made.

A copy is usually made of something deserving; a tribute to the object's value, quality or status. As I don't attempt to make a better copy of a real flower, but rather to replicate to the best of my ability its common imitation, I engage in something seemingly not worthwhile. After all, the plastic flower is in itself not a very good replica of a real thing. I have talked before about the glorified status of the hand-made, reinforced by the easy availability of the digital and mass produced copies: with time and skill invested and limited number achieved, the hand-made seems to attain the higher status within the replicas. Considering that both of the artificial flowers are objects in their own right as well as copies of a botanical plant, which one is a better original? Or even: which one is better at *being* an original?

Limited to materials and resources that I have access to, I often have to compromise – but imagine if it would be possible to re-create the plastic flower exactly, with the same technology as used in its mass production? In the end, this perfect copy would be no more than original. And yet the imperfect copy is more.

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[14] Mc Hugh, Gene. 12.29.09 – 09.05.2010. *Post Internet. Notes on Internet and Art.* 30 April 2010. Brescia: LINK Editions, 2011

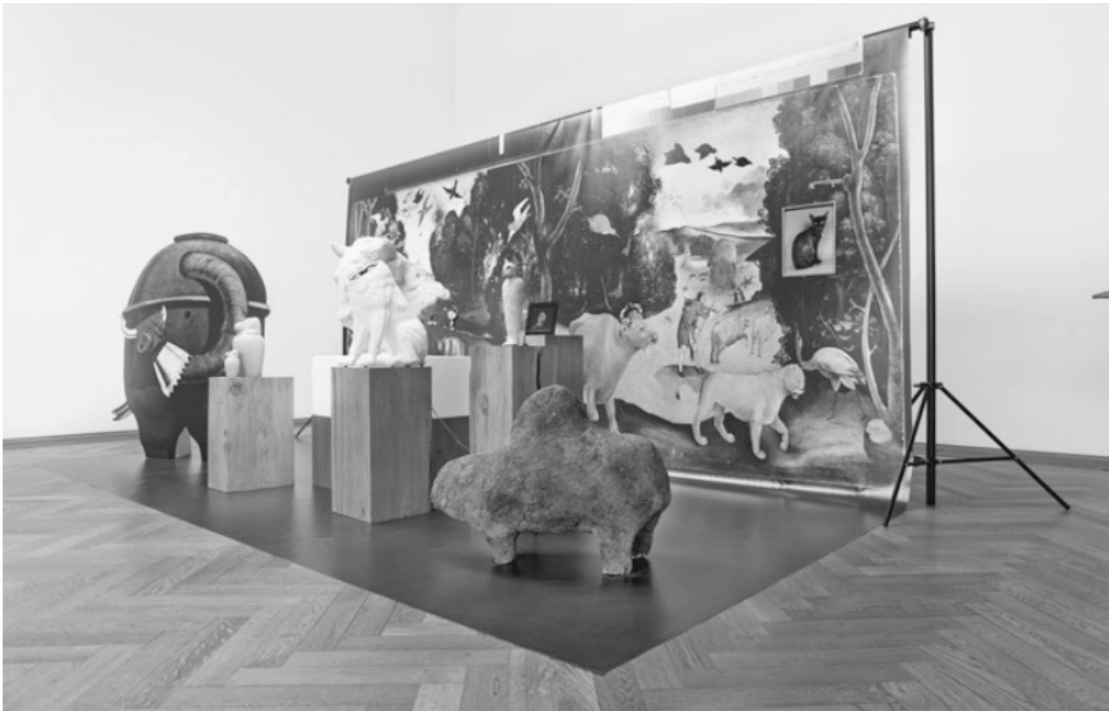

Fig. 1: Leckey, Mark. Installation view of the exhibition *UniAddDumThs*, section *Animal*. Kunsthalle Basel, 2015

Fig. 2: Installation view of the exhibition *The Brancusi Effect*. Kunsthalle Wien, 2014

Fig. 3: Brancusi, Constantin. *The Artist's Studio*. 1922

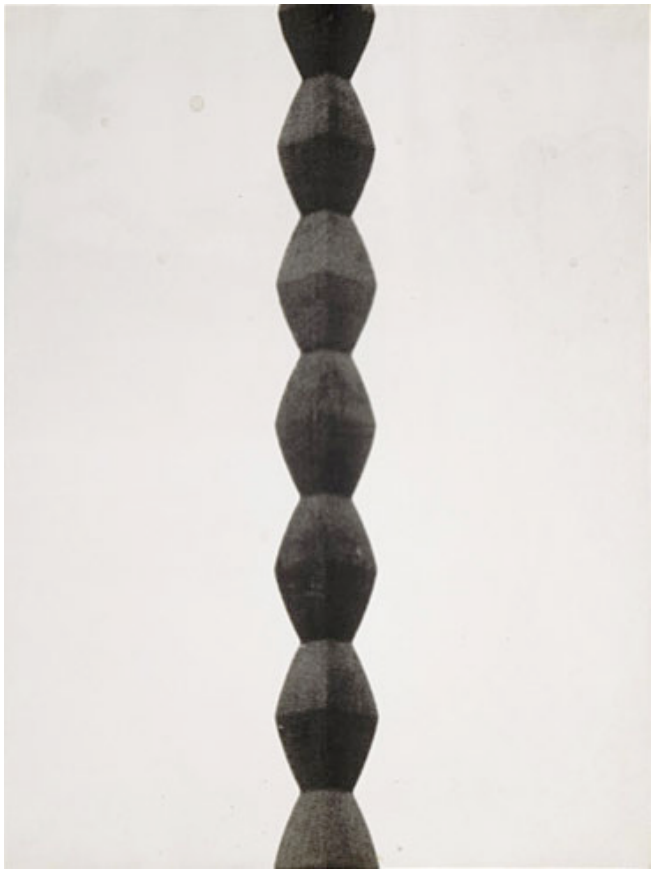

Fig. 4: Brancusi, Constantin. *Endless Column* [Cast iron modules]. Târgu Jiu, Romania, 1938

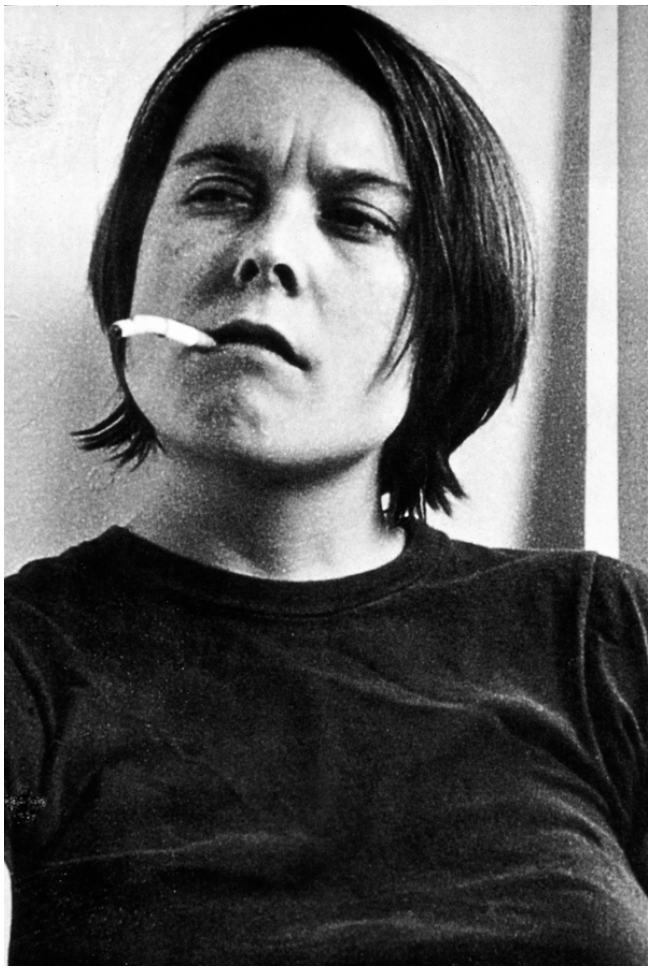

Fig. 5: Lucas, Sarah. *Fighting Fire with Fire* [Photography]. 1996

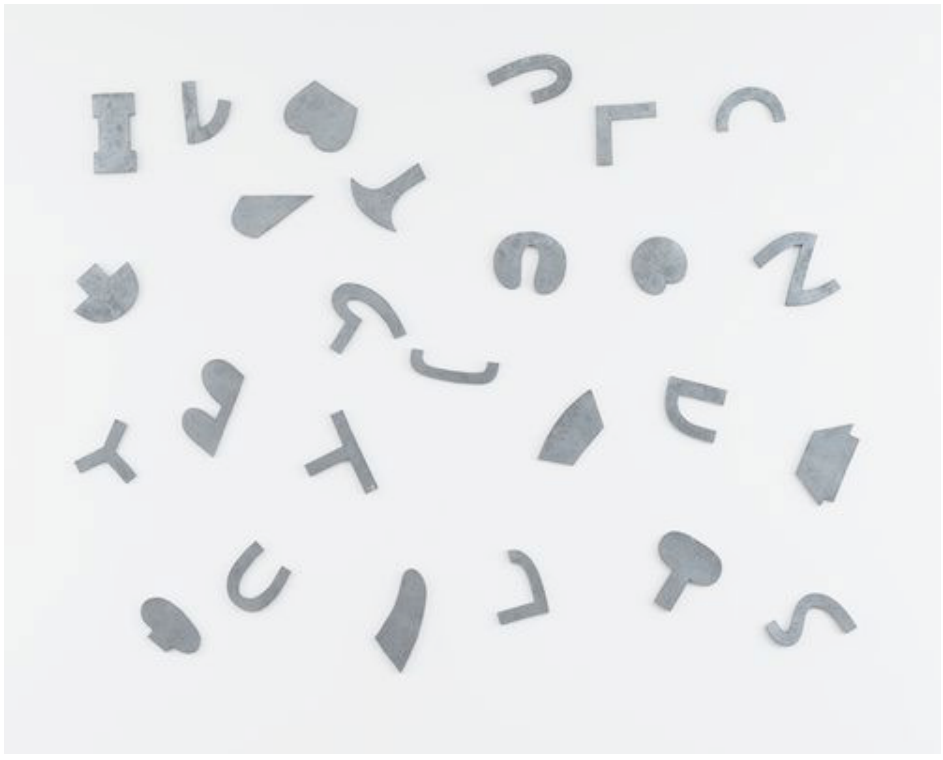

Fig. 6: Tuttle, Richard. *Letters (The Twenty-Six Series)* [Galvanized iron]. 1966

Fig:7 Film still from *Over your cities grass will grow* directed by Sophie Fiennes. 2010

Fig 8: Genzken, Isa. *Bouquet* [Plastic, wood, lacquer, mirror foil, glass]. 2004