ARTFORUM

FEATURE

WORDS TO LIVE BY

MICHAEL WILSON ON THE ART OF MARK TITCHNER

View of "Be Angry But Don't Stop Breathing," Tate Britain, London, 2003.

In adverse speaking conditions one should always replace the term "I" with the term "WE," moving the focus of the speech away from the isolated individual towar ds a hypothetical consensual group. One should always emphasize the undeniable truth of what one is saying. One should speak like the creator! One's speech should be like a diamond hammered into the skull of the listener!
—Mark Titchner, Why and Why Not *(Book Works, London, 2004)*

In his artist's book *Why and Why Not (Vibrations, Schizzes and Knots)* (2004), Mark Titchner adopts a bewildering variety of voices, the linguistic mode of his

essays ranging from the measured and philosophical to the improvised and intuitive, the apparently confessional to the openly fictive, the broadly approachable to the defensively hermetic. Indeed, as the curious screed's title suggests, these reasoned arguments and unhinged rants—some seem assembled posthumously from someone's lifetime of musings, while others read as though hammered out in an all-night brainstorm—comprise a series of strategic juxtapositions of point with counterpoint, regularly seeming both incommensurate and self-contradictory. All these divergent passages, however, ultimately return to a tub-thumping conviction underscored by the publication's appearance: In a series of computer-generated color plates interspersed throughout, sloganlike remarks and exhortations are subjected to strident, even aggressive graphic treatments. (YOU HEAR A JOKE ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOU JOIN IN THE LAUGHTER and NO ONE WHO IS NOT IN A STATE OF PERFECT GRACE HAS ANYTHING TO CONTRIBUTE are just two examples of these texts.) Their designs variously suggest religious posters, British trade-union banners, American psychedelia, and even Eastern European revolutionary propaganda, but Titchner most often employs a conspicuously masculine black-white-and-red color scheme and, bold, angular font that immediately evoke Russian constructivism. As a result, the book (respectable production values and Arts Council of England seal of approval notwithstanding) has the edgy feel of a samizdat manifesto. Yet even this almost evangelical air of certainty does little to make these words' conclusions—or lack thereof—any more coherent or persuasive. Dispensing love and bile in more or less equal measure, Titchner the writer summons declarative force only to cast profound doubt on the authority of any given creed.

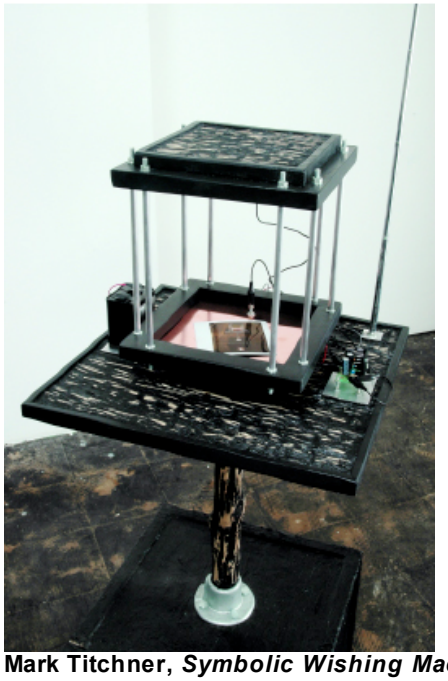
Illustration from Mark Titchner's, *Why and Why Not (Vibrations, Schizzes, and Knots)* (Book Works, 2004).

Titchner's use of language—a kind of alienated, undermined, institutional poetic—inevitably brings to mind the refashioned aphorisms and epigrams of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger. Last year he installed a group of billboards collectively titled "I We It" at London's Gloucester Road underground station;

these featured appropriated corporate slogans, a variation on his signature deployment of simple phrases delivered with bold (if not top-of-your-lungs) rhetorical force via posters and light boxes. But the thirty-two-year-old London-based artist's influences are more eclectic than these art-historical examples, and his approach is unique in its interweaving of visions both public and private. For example, in a concluding note of thanks for *Why and Why Not,* Titchner reveals that his words have origins "beginning with Bad Brains and ending with Wilhelm Reich." Indeed, regarding the latter source, throughout his work Titchner often turns to arcane science or pseudoscience, taking up in particular the language of researchers who believed that their revolutionary profiles of the individual psychological subject would have shattering sociopolitical implications. (Titchner is also influenced by the notion of "fierce sociology," a fanciful discipline—taken up by the London-based collective Inventory but originating in Michel Maffesoli's *The Sociology of Everyday Life* [1988]—concerned with the playful *détournement* of culture's more prosaic realities.) Whereas Holzer or Kruger might compose or appropriate texts based on the very familiarity of the words themselves (or at least the sentiments therein), Titchner looks to courageous tracts whose continuing marginality—even heroic failure when it came to their introduction into quotidian life—is a part of their continuing interest. The myriad voices in *Why and Why Not* exist in an inconclusive state of entropy, irreversibly decaying but never disappearing completely.

Titchner's textual choices suggest that the point at which respectable mainstream science fades into a more nebulous—and dubious—arena of free-form experimentation also tends to be where echoes of the surrounding counterculture are most clearly audible. A 2003 installation in London commissioned for Tate Britain's "Art Now" series, *Be Angry but Don't Stop Breathing,* includes further references to Reich, as well as to three other uniquely controversial figures: Hans Jenny, natural scientist; Arthur Janov, pioneer of primal therapy; and Emanuel Swedenborg, philosopher and theologian. At the center of the installation is a carved wooden structure that sprouts a series of periscope-like tubes linked to a tray of dark liquid—the surface of which convulses and ripples when visitors shout into the tubes' orifices. Titchner would be the first to admit that the work has an awkward, even grating aesthetic in common with much of his output. But if he is ambivalent toward the notion of visual pleasure, it is only in order to concentrate our attention more precisely on the historical conditions, past and present, to which he refers. In this case, his device is presented as a conflation of Jenny's theory of cymatics (which holds that all matter is in a constant state of vibration), the primal scream therapy extrapolated from Janov's original equation of mental pain with physical breakdown, and Swedenborg's characterization of language as derived from an original—nonverbal—divine communiqué. The sprawling significations of this totemic central object are then compounded by a surrounding display of standards, whose explicitly religious overtones parallel the quasi-spiritual fervor and idealism with which the researchers' ideas were

originally proposed. Inscribed with the words AND DUALITY, AND VIVIDNESS, AND INTENSITY (and so on), they are accompanied by a list of gnomic rational-evangelical statements headed IF THE TRUTH CAN BE TOLD SO AS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IT WILL BE BELIEVED and a large printed banner on which the words of the title are layered over a starburst motif. The stage is set and the opening lines have been delivered—what happens next is up to us.



Mark Titchner, *Symbolic Wishing Machine Plus Orgone Accumulator,* 2004, wood, steel, paint, copper, electronics, wire, wool, and plastic, 45 1/4 x 18 x 19 1/4".

Of course, chances are that whatever action we are prodded into will prove anticlimactic, and whatever belief we are encouraged to uphold will ultimately fall by the wayside. While one might characterize Titchner's styling as *retrogressive,* it utterly refuses the comforts of collective nostalgia, and the texts and objects Titchner offers up in works like *Be Angry* function as placeholders for a self-consciously melancholic idealism-after-the-fact. In this respect, the work's use of quotation resembles that of Thomas Hirschhorn's constructions and installations, which similarly allude to a broad spectrum of radical thought—by physically containing it in the form of printed matter—without demanding or imparting any clear or specific knowledge. But while Tate curator Lizzie Carey-Thomas writes in an essay accompanying *Be Angry* that "Titchner does not appear to offer judgment or critique of the theories he appropriates," it is nevertheless safe to assume that each idea, by its very appearance in his work, is already colored by a degree of notoriety and/or cult appeal, and is presented at least in part as a genuine homage. Indeed, Titchner's interest in fringe research has even involved him in reconstructing investigational tools, partially retaining but always visibly subverting their original (often already subversive) intended function. In *Orgone Accumulator,* 1999, the artist paid homage to Reich's Orgone Box (a mystical isolation tank designed to infuse its

inhabitant with sexual energy) and in *Analogue Fountain,* 1999, to Ian Sommerville and Brion Gysin's druglessly psychoactive Dreamachine (a simple device that filters light from an ordinary bulb to create a flickering pattern with the power, when observed through closed eyelids, to induce a visionary state). Carved roughly in wood, Titchner's sculptural tributes are like the freshly unearthed prototypes for projects whose radically transformative objectives ultimately proved wildly overambitious. Our experience of these objects is one of disappointment embodied, of relics that taunt us with visions of what might have been. And in reproducing scientific forms in the context of visual culture, they confront us, too, with the specters of art's own unbuilt roads.

Mark Titchner, *The Final Times Have Been and Gone,* 1999, sprayed household paint on wall, dimensions variable.

Derived as they are from mechanisms whose operation depends on the partly autonomic workings of the individual human brain and body, works like *Analogue Fountain* make us truly queasy by operating in extrarational space. In *Voices you cannot hear tell you what to do,* 2004, Titchner makes a still more explicit allusion to psychic manipulation. A relentlessly looping video animation accompanied by heavily processed speech and a droning abstract noise, *Voices* appears to have been produced by some malevolent agency aiming to destabilize knowledge previously considered secure and hell-bent on having our absolute obedience to its sometimes cryptic but always insistent dictates. As a circular abstract graphic undulates hypnotically in the center of the screen, a disorienting barrage of animated text demands IS THIS THE ROLE YOU WANTED TO LIVE? Employing a range of visual and musical tempos simultaneously in a manner that recalls the densely layered "vertical" constructions pioneered by rap producer Hank Shocklee, Titchner combines flickering, quasi-subliminal pulses of text with eerily drawn-out spoken statements, commands, and narrative fragments: THEY BECKON YOU WITH OPEN ARMS YOU SALIVATE AT SALVATION; JUST TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT TO DO.

Paralleling Titchner's archeological investigation of discredited yet still seductive ideas is his interest in the cultural resonance of decorative

patterns—in particular those dating from the 1960s and '70s. It was in large-scale wall paintings such as *The final times have been and gone* and *Why is there something instead of nothing?* (both 1999) that Titchner began to explore this area in earnest, riffing on childhood memories of the domestic design that characterized his parents' home when he was growing up. "I perceived a lineage of the patterns," Titchner explained to Mark Dickenson in 2001, "from say Malevich, Albers, through Vasarely, Riley to something that eventually ends up as home decor." In the backgrounds of his more recent light boxes, banners, prints, and posters, Titchner continues to incorporate decorative and abstract designs that are the aesthetic residue of specific artistic orthodoxies. Within the context of those initiatives, the patterns represent ways of seeing that were once politicized rather than simply pretty (or pretty ugly). In the billboards of "I We It," they are combined with texts of a more conservative ideology, becoming a condensed (and public) version of the kind of abrasive juxtapositions found in the pages of *Why and Why Not.* While the original phrases spelled out a corporate vision in which mankind, the environment, industry, and marketing could comfortably coexist, Titchner's addition of the words WE WANT before each one (a technique taken from the Black Panthers' 1969 *Ten Point Plan)* transforms them into something more demanding, even—given their characteristically aggressive look—threatening. (Two examples: WE WANT TO SHAPE THE WORLD'S FUTURE; WE WANT STRONG LEADERSHIP.) In conflating mutually antagonistic positions, Titchner extends his project into openly contested territory.

View of Mark Titchner, "I We It," Gloucester Road underground station, London, 2004. Ten digital prints on aluminum.

But not every work by the artist depends on this antiaesthetic engagement. Standing in studied contrast is Titchner's rather tender animated video *Bedtime for Necromancy,* 2004, an appreciation of the true story of Eldridge Cleaver, a Black Panther who, while alone and feeling suicidal on the Mediterranean coast, claimed to see the faces of his revolutionary idols Marx, Engels, Mao,

and Castro in the plains and craters of the moon. In Titchner's version, as each famous visage fades into the past, becoming as much a myth as the man in the moon, he gives a reassuring wink, as if to say, "Well, we did our best—things didn't quite work out the way we planned but, hey, no hard feelings. Just think of us every now and then." The tune of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" (played backward but sounding hardly different than the original) underscores the video's wistful, elegiac mood. While he is never so deluded as to push for a revival of any one ideology, Titchner displays a palpable affection for declaredly progressive thought that proved too fast to live.

Mark Titchner, *Bedtime for Necromancy,* 2004, stills from a color video, 2 minutes 42 seconds.

Michael Wilson is an associate editor of Artforum.