How to Do Things with Email: *My Holy Nacho*

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In June 2013, Jamie Allen and Bernhard Garnicnig took three steps to set in motion the collaborative, fragmented and remotely controlled project *My Holy Nacho*. To start with, they selected six different used objects that were being sold on well-known web pages. Then, they established the rules: one of the objects purchased would be sent by the "project manager", in turn, to ten different service providers (chosen from among companies advertising themselves online, and offering the possibility of ordering through the Internet) to undergo ten different industrial processes. The object would be shipped from one provider to the next, without touching base during the entire duration of the initiative. And upon completion, in the third and last step the project would be made public by means of two strategies: a final, "unboxing" ceremony where the object, so far unknown to the public and the artists alike, would be unveiled; and the dissemination, both online and in printed form, of parts of the profuse digital documentation that the project would give rise to.

> "A transactional and transnational art project between two artists who enjoy misunderstanding each other, using the gaps in communications via electronic media to create an artwork. *My Holy Nacho* is a sculptural object built from fissured transmissions and mistranslations – even the title of the work is the result of a misunderstanding: a mishearing of the name 'Moholy-Nagy' in a noisy pub in Northern England; a mumbled mispronunciation in a Canadian accent to an Austrian not-so-native speaker."

> "What exactly is it that happens when you click the 'submit' button on a browser? Will a factory worker be set to action in a distant land? Will a power outage be caused in a small town near a data-center? Will global economies be affected? Will it make someone smile? Will a long-lost friend come and visit? There is so much power in the action of a 'click', to move people, money, mountains, art".[1]

My Holy Nacho is, therefore, an artistic undertaking in which the act of asking third parties to perform given tasks, fabricate or produce the materialization of somebody else's ideas becomes the foundation for the creative practice. In this sense, it inscribes itself in the rich tradition of "art by delegation", a place frequented by many artists at different moments of the 20th century. László Moholy-Nagy's "telephone pictures" are perhaps the best known example of this tradition: in 1922, he ordered by telephone from a sign manufacturer five steel panels of various sizes, which had to be enameled in white and decorated with a simple geometric design in black, red and yellow. But when he requested them, instead of providing the factory supervisor with drawings, sketches or even written directions, Moholy-Nagy just told him what he wanted done over the phone. With this, he aimed to prove that sheer intellectual input could give birth to a work of art without it having to be accompanied by the artist's technical skills or affective links to the art object. In his day, Moholy-Nagy was a pioneer in questioning notions of artistic authority, an area that would not be revisited until many decades later. But in addition, he was interested in underlining the potentialities of remote communication in the creation of art – in particular when it took place by means of technology. Communication among human beings is a key aspect of such creation, and it therefore occurred to him that a technology like the telephone – relatively new at the time – could be useful for artistic purposes, inasmuch as it enhanced human communication and enormously expanded its potential.

In later decades, numerous artists would turn their attention to thinking about how the action of making art can be transferred to the viewer (or reader) rather than remain the reserve of the artist. In 1962, Yoko Ono published her book *Grapefruit*, a compendium of "scores" intended to give instructions for the reader to perform:

> *Portrait of Mary*, spring 1962
> "Send a canvas to a Mary of any country and have her paste her photograph. Have her send the canvas to the next Mary of any country to do the same. When the canvas is filled up with photographs of Marys, it should be sent back to the original sender. The name does not have to be Mary. It, also, can be a fictional name, in which case the canvas will be sent to different countries until a person with such

1 Jamie Allen and Bernhard Garnicnig, press release for *My Holy Nacho*, 2015.

> a name will be found. The object to paste on the canvas does not have to be a photograph. It can be a numeral figure, an insect or a finger print."[2]

With this book, Yoko Ono demonstrated that a plain printed text suffices when it comes to asking others to produce the art work. And yet Moholy-Nagy was not alone in his preference for the use of a technologically sophisticated communication medium: cutting-edge technology has been favored in many "art by delegation" projects, to a large extent due to the seduction exerted by the potentiallity of remote communication. Examples abound, here are just two of them:

Shortly after its opening, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago scheduled an exhibition for 1969, descriptively entitled *Art by Telephone*, which would bring together works phoned in by artists and created on-site by museum staff in accordance with their specifications. The aim of the show was to highlight the growing but then incipient trend toward conceptualization in art by presenting works for whose realization telephone communication was a key element. Siah Armajani, Richard Artschwager, John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, Geoge Brecht, James Lee Byars, Robert H. Cumming, Jan Dibbets, John Giorno, Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Dick Higgins, Ed Kienholz, Joseph Kosuth, Les Levine, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenburg, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra and Robert Smithson were among the intended exhibition's many participants. Unfortunately – and ironically – it was eventually abandoned due to technical difficulties, but a publication was issued in the shape of an LP with recordings of the artists giving directions or being interviewed by the museum's director, Jan van der Marck.[3]

In the same year as the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art had expected to open its failed exhibition, Walter de Maria paid his personal tribute to Moholy-Nagy's piece by creating his own *Art by Telephone*, exhibited for the first time in the seminal show *When Attitudes Become Form* (Kunsthalle Bern, 1969, curated by Harald Szeenman). For this work, visitors were confronted with a telephone placed on the floor of the exhibition space, next to a sheet of paper bearing the following text: "If this telephone rings, you may answer it. Walter de Maria is on the line and would like to talk to you". In this instance, De Maria's piece was neither the telephone nor the note, but rather the potential conversation that could eventually take place between the artist and any given visitor: the work consisted in that possible act of communication, not in the objects that were there to enable it.

Such "objectlessness" was very much the essence of most of the works exhibited in *When Attitudes Become Form*, and one of the reasons why that exhibition became a turning point in contemporary art-making:

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2 Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*, 1962. New York: self-published, n/p.

3 A free, downloadable MP3 of the original *Art by Telephone* record can be found on UbuWeb at: *ubu.com/sound/art_by_telephone.html*

> "The major characteristic of today's art is no longer the articulation of space but human activity, the activity of the artist has become the dominant theme and content. (…) The artists represented in the present exhibition are in no way object-makers. On the contrary, they aspire to freedom from the object, and in this way deepen the levels of meaning of the object, reveal the meaning of those levels beyond the object."[4]

In 2013, when a remake of the original *When Attitudes Become Form* was produced coinciding with the Venice Biennale,[5] there again was Walter de Maria's telephone on the floor in the middle of the exhibition space, beside the corresponding note. A few weeks after the opening however, when the artist passed away, the telephone and the note had to be removed, since the potential for a telephone conversation between the artist and visitors simply ceased to exist – for ever.

My Holy Nacho shares many of the traits of these works that precede it. Like Yoko Ono in her scores, Allen and Garnicnig have chosen to become initiators of actions instead of producers, and expect somebody else to perform the specific actions they both have in mind. As with the Walter de Maria piece, in *My Holy Nacho* communication – and miscommunication – is the key: one could even say it is the vehicle, the interface upon which the creative process takes form – so the actual medium of the project is language, while the object being processed seems to be a mere excuse for dialogue to start. And finally, like Moholy-Nagy in his time, they have chosen most contemporary communication systems – websites, web forms, electronic mail – as the basic channel through which dialogues take place. Technology is, in this case, decisive: *My Holy Nacho* is completely dependent on online modes of communication and shared information. It is also very much conditioned by geographical remoteness: all of the people involved in the *My Holy Nacho* artistic team are geographically distanced from one another – Jamie Allen in Basel and Copenhaguen, Bernhard Garnicnig in Vienna, Sóley Mist Hjálmarsdóttir in Copenhagen – as are all of the industrial service providers chosen for each of the ten processes to which the *My Holy Nacho* object is subjected, scattered throughout the United States, Europe and Asia.

But *My Holy Nacho* also tackles many issues that are specific to this project and, one could say, new to the tradition of art by delegation. By involving professional service providers in various locations around the world, which often turn out to be freelancers, mon-and-pop shops, artisans, small businesses, as well as the large "faceless corporations" whose faces are, in fact, both highly individual and numerous, *My Holy Nacho* raises questions that have to do with the politics of labor in the 21st century. At the same time, it suggests an original meaning for the concept of

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4 Harald Szeeman, "About the Exhibition", in the catalog *When Attitudes Become Form*. Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1969, n/p.

5 *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, Fondazione Prada Ca' Corner della Regina, June–November 2013 (curated by Germano Celant).

collaboration in art, in which collaborators are only half aware of their role as such – though their awareness or lack of it may be irrelevant to the final result. In addition, unlike Walter de Maria's *Art by Telephone*, *My Holy Nacho* does not address the potential for artists to reach their public directly and establish a conversation with them: it is not the possibility of an unmediated exchange between the artist as sender and the public as receiver which is at stake here, but the prospect of setting off actions in the physical world just by issuing language utterances in the online realm. *Language utterances* – to be precise – that almost invariably adopt *the written form*: *My Holy Nacho* is a project in which written communication online is not simply the medium, it is the basic raw material. And thanks to the impulse of *written communication exchanges online*, ten physical, non-linguistic actions are undertaken to modify or manipulate the *My Holy Nacho* object in the offline world. These written communication exchanges make up the bulk of the digital archive left behind by the process as a whole.

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The capability of language to provoke actions, but also to embody actions that can only happen by being uttered in sentences, was widely explored by J. L. Austin in the series of lectures he delivered at Harvard University in 1955, later published in his well-known book *How to Do Things with Words*.[6] Austin's lectures, which would have profound impact in linguistics and philosophy alike, expanded the general understanding of linguistic utterances by proving that *to do* should be added to the classical functions of language: declare, deny, question, command, etc. This is so because there exists a kind of linguistic statements that produce actions by the very act of being uttered: actions such as "I curse you", or "I bet", which could not happen outside of language, because they do not take place unless we utter them. In Austin's own words, sometimes "to say something *is* to do something, or *in saying* something we do something, and even *by saying* something we do something."

"Request", "order", "confirm", "accept", "thank"… During the two years that *My Holy Nacho* has been underway, the number of words used in the context of the project that fall into this performative category, first described by Austin over sixty years ago, has not ceased to expand, as can be proven by a careful look at the bulky collection of email exchanges the project has left behind. This should not come as a surprise, for Austin's category seems to have become particularly productive in the bodiless online world where, to a great extent, communication happens basically in the written form, and the concept of "executing an action" is not the same as "doing something" offline. Indeed, the first impression produced by going through the abundant

6 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

exchanges of written messages that development of *My Holy Nacho* has brought about is that this is the way things are: when the *My Holy Nacho* project manager sends a *request* for information to the email address of a given provider, she gets that information. When she *confirms* an order, that order becomes real, it is processed, and a given industrial activity is carried out. When she *asks for* the object to be shipped, that is precisely what happens to it.

However, a detailed observation reveals that this is often not exactly, or not only, the case. Ot the other side of the communication spectrum, the unfolding of the project has also produced a good deal of phatic utterances that seem to have no relevant meaning, nor specific senders or recipients: they float in the vast online environment, hidden behind various forms to be filled in, or at the end of concatenations of clicks; prefabricated, often interchangeable messages which question the rhetoric of Internet's alleged interactivity potential. *My Holy Nacho* has lived in countless messages along the lines of "Thanks for contacting us", "Thanks for your enquiry", "We confirm your order", "Your request is being forwarded to one of our representatives", or "You have received a payment". Though at first sight some of these might seem to fall into the category of phrases which "do something by being said", it is often the case that they do not really *do* anything – and hardly even *mean* anything, in fact, aside from giving the receiver the impression that communication continues and dialogue is still open. As Austin pointed out in his lectures, "…it is obviously necessary that to have promised, I must normally (A) have been *heard* by someone, perhaps the promisee; and (B) have been understood by him as promising."[7] Set phrases such as the examples above fail to fulfill these conditions; they pullulate in the online world, apparently suspended in the gray space between their potential for becoming actions in themselves when they are uttered, and the void involved in their lack of context: they were there before any online exchange of information started, and will be there when such exchanges are finished, forever waiting for the right moment to jump into sight on the screen.

In the digital archive that the project has generated, language, the basic substance of which *My Holy Nacho* is made, oscillates between utterances intended to be actions, and utterances which are intended to be suitable in countless different contexts and end up, therefore, being almost meaningless in semantic terms.

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Jamie Allen and Bernhard Garnicnig decided to set the ball rolling, and started choosing the agents they would commission to undertake the successive steps in the process. Their appointed project manager selected the object that would embody the "physical" side of the project,

7 Ibid., p. 93.

and pushed the action forward until its completion. That object, whose nature has remained unknown, has travelled from provider to provider, being transformed in a series of stages which respond to no particular logic: they could have happened in a different order and they could have simply been different in themselves, but that would not have had any effect on the essence of *My Holy Nacho*. Even though they were given a brief explanation of what *My Holy Nacho* was about, the fact is that the various providers that have acted upon the object often lacked a general perspective of the project's basis and aims, as well as esthetic aspirations in performing their tasks. However, neither of these things entailed a conflict, since in the context of this initiative the object is not really intended to achieve the conventional status of "work of art" at the end of the process. In fact, the object has, in a way, been abandoned to its material fate, without the intentional intervention of the artists in its formal characteristics. The significance of *My Holy Nacho* relies entirely on the process that it has given rise to – and in the archive that this process has brought about, through time and space, over the last two years.

My Holy Nacho has generated a considerable collection of records, which consists almost exclusively of digital documents. These include email exchanges with human recipients; email exchanges with automatic recipients; website screenshots; pdf and jpeg files with standard information about industrial service providers; every possible kind of accountancy receipt; transcripts from online bank accounts; forms that have been duly filled in with a variety of data; photographs of the object being manipulated; tracking lists of several courier companies; and so on. As mentioned above, in many instances the communications generated by the project have been full of set phrases and fixed expressions – to a great extent delivered by automatic reply systems – which reduces the significance of parts of these exchanges to ready-to-use online dialogues, intended to maintain the contact and the communication flow rather than say anything in particular. Prefabricated and, in a way, anonymously produced materials constitute a significant part of this archive, coexisting with a lesser amount of more colloquial and personal information exchanges among the project members. Certainly the affectionate, the particular and the subjective do not count among the dominant categories of documents in the *My Holy Nacho* archive.

But this is hardly remarkable since, as often happens, on the whole the archive fairly accurately mirrors the characteristics of the process by which it was created and put together. Thus, in the same way as the materiality of the *My Holy Nacho* object is not what the project was about, and the physical qualities of the object seem to fade away at the same time as the project moves on and the *My Holy Nacho* digital archive grows, relevant personal or subjective pieces of information – one of the features upon which the specific significance of archives relies, in comparison to other sources of information – gradually become more and more overshadowed by the standard and the preformatted. The digital archive of *My Holy Nacho*, therefore,

constitutes a very good example of the adage that the real meaning of an archive is far greater than the sum of the meanings of each of its constituent documents. Being built of sometimes confused, often intricate, partly pre-assembled, disconnected and incomplete communication chains, this archive fails to depict in an orderly and precise fashion what happened first, what came afterwards, what were the causes and what were the results of the project, at the same time as it succeeds superbly in capturing, with the utmost precision, the essence of the *My Holy Nacho* project.

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I was recruited into the team during the last six months of *My Holy Nacho*, tasked with giving shape to the contents of the project archive so that it could be accessed and presented to the public. As probably occurred with most of the industrial service providers that have been manipulating the object over the course of the project, I was told what *My Holy Nacho* was about and what my role in it would be, but at first my understanding of the project, and of my own function in it, was limited and somewhat foggy. It was only through a more concentrated and prolonged exposure to the archive materials, in addition to long conversations with Allen and Garnicnig, that I would eventually gain a deeper comprehension of the project. As this happened, it gradually became clear to me that factors such as chance, misunderstanding, cloudiness in perception and incompleteness were the issues at stake, and had the same relevance as communication, process, intentionality, authorship, anonymity and "objectlessness". It also became apparent that the challenge lay in presenting the archive – both online and offline – in such a way as to stress its somewhat twisted, obscure structure, at the expense of its components' individuality and intelligibility. In other words, I had to work in a way contrary to what amounts to "common sense" in the archival world, where structure, order and hierarchy are sacred concepts.

It was not easy to take this path, that went in the opposite direction to most of the other archive experiments that I had carried through. But once started, why not go a bit further? When it became evident that any successful presentation of the *My Holy Nacho* archive would need to stress its perverted structure, its heterogeneity, the scant value of any of its documents taken individually, its obscureness… it also became apparent that the very "objectlessness" of the archive, made only of digital materials, could also be subverted or, at least, challenged. If the object which lay at the core of the project had gradually lost weight and physical relevance, then, why not push the archive in a parallel – if opposite – direction? The *My Holy Nacho* archive is digital – it has no "material" form, so why not give it it physical materiality and transform it into some sort of physical object, that turns the "objectlessness" of digital archives inside out?

11 · *My Holy Nacho*, 2015

The present publication, where the archive is embodied by a 420 x 29,7 cm long strip of messy texts and images, is the result of such an endeavor. This presentation, which can work as a regular codex publication but can also be expanded in space so as to become almost sculptural, aims to capture, in a partly metaphorical and partly down-to-earth way, what *My Holy Nacho* has been about, and what remains of it in the form of an archive. It sets out to provide a physical "body" which serves as visual representation of online communication and dialogue, making visible, to some extent, the entangled and at the same time disconnected steps by which *My Holy Nacho* has steadily unfolded as a project. In a new instance of "art by delegation", this publication responds to the artists' wishes and follows their motivation, but has been carried out with no specific directions from their side, thus becoming a further materialization of the concept on which they based the entire project – one that, one hopes, will also pose questions and open new perspectives with regard to the issues that this project addresses.
