

AND NOW, GENTLEMEN, THE SHIRTS OFF YOUR BACKS IF YOU PLEASE

(As told by Snowden Snowden while drinking coffee/beer and eating clementines)

Yeah, it's funny. Really all you'd have to do is start saying stuff nobody understands and everyone will do what you want ... but there are loads of ways to nod your head yes and shake it no at the same time. Bennett Simpson (who is a really sharp and funny guy) told me this story about Merlin Carpenter when I was at the Mountain School.

Carpenter was gonna be in a show Bennett was curating at the ICA in Philadelphia about artists that pow-wow'd in Cologne during the eighties, early nineties. I think it was called MAKE YOUR OWN LIFE, but I don't know. People like Krebber, Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Rosemarie Trockel, Jutta Koether, Gareth James, Hans-Jörg Mayer, Kim Gordon, lots of others. It was a funny thing to do 'cause all these artists don't really stick together the way, say, an abstract expressionist retrospective would stick together. I mean you can hold together the Cologne artists on geography and time and proly on who slept with who and who spit in whose tonic, but they weren't all congregating to sing homilies, or meeting after work to finesse the subject-verb agreement of their manifesto's closing couplet or something. All I mean is that you can't just stick 'em in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone. It's going to be complicated, and Merlin made sure Bennett got that loud and clear.

It's probably a good time to say that this isn't airtight. I didn't see the show, which is probably another reason I'm so head-over for it. The other weird material to this thing was that they were doing a 'historical' show before the lights had totally gone out on the scene. By art-world clocks, the show happened before it was supposed to. It's interesting to do a retrospective so quickly after something happens. Not so different from when a band puts out a greatest hits record before the verdict's out on whether they deserve the behemoth liner notes and the box set. I think Fleetwood Mac did exactly this, and I think I bought the thing twice. It's interesting and uncomfortable for a museum to do this 'cause the material is neither historic nor really contemporary. I won't say Bennett and co. curated the show at the nadir of this fashion cycle, but it wasn't exactly a sartorial move that had everyone going, 'Oui, oui, yuh-yuh.' I like stuff that's happening when it's not supposed to according to taste.

(Sorry, I have a messy brain. Jesus, I mean, if I met myself, I'd say there's a guy who can't do his laundry without losing his car keys. I'd definitely mime 'nutter' to my friend when 'me' turned back around to catch the cocktail tray floating by.)

So Bennett and Merlin have this long correspondence about what it might mean to make a show like this, Merlin being invaluable in deciding how one goes about retro-

scoping Cologne in Philadelphia at the wrong time, or at least in helping Bennett catalog all the baroque reasons one should NOT do this show. And one day, Bennett says,

'You know Merlin, I really want you to be in this show, and I know you have problems with it, and I want to give you the license to do what you want, and I want to set aside enough dough and time so that you can.' Your basic sky's-the-limit green-room conversation.

And Merlin says,

'Okay, great, but I don't know what I want to do yet.' This is a year out. Bennett says,

'Great, fine. We'll touch base in a few months and decide.' Three months go by and Bennett hasn't heard a note from Merlin, so he writes.

'Say, Merlin, Bennett S. here, how goes? Nine months till showtime! Any ideas? Please get back to me when you have a moment. The museum wants to start budgeting out all the works and getting the shipping and travel arrangements, blah, blah, blah.'

Another three months go by and still no word from Merlin. Bennett writes something like,

'Dear Merlin, Six months till showtime. What's going on? What are your plans? What are you going to do? Please let me know. We've got to put you in the catalog, we've got to get the insurance, come on man, I've got like 30 people working on this thing ... it's imperative you get back ASAP. Thanks, Bennett'

Still no word from Merlin, and now Bennett is getting nervous because it's six months out, which in museum time is like two days. This is hard to explain if you haven't operated on curatorial time. It's almost geologic. I've watched their clocks. It takes these places forever to make a baby, right. Oh right, I forgot, you're architects ... you know what it's like to propose a model for a car dealership that will be built in the year 2020.

Anyways. Another three months go by. Now it's three months out. Fifteen minutes in real-world time. And Bennett still hasn't heard a word from Merlin. He writes something like,

God-damn-it Merlin. It's three months from the show and the museum is freaking out, I'm freaking out, we're freaking out ... what the fuck are you going to make?

Maybe another two months go by, so now it's a month away from opening night, and Bennett is really fucking flipping out now. By now he's just sending an SOS. Maybe it was a fax in blood. Something like,

'DEAR MERLIN,
BENNETT.'

Merlin writes back, 'Hi Bennett, I'm going to make five paintings. Can you check how much the shipping will be?' Bennett writes back,

'Great, thanks Merlin, we checked on the shipping. It'll be four thousand dollars. Not a problem. We've set it aside.' Merlin writes back,

'Fantastic. I'm gonna make the paintings in Philadelphia, the week before the show, but I'll need the four thousand in cash when I get to Philadelphia.' And Bennett is like,

'Fuck, Merlin, I can't give you four thousand dollars in cash. This isn't an ATM. This is an art institution.' And Merlin was like,

'Dude, I need four thousand dollars. In cash. I've got to do these paintings. I'm gonna do them in Philadelphia the week before the show.' So Bennett informs the mom and dad of Merlin's plans, which has to be an impossible sale. Just the fact that Bennett's doing it should spell out how committed he is to seeing it happen ... and after some lengthy discussions the museum agrees – reluctantly – to Merlin's demands.

A week before the show, Merlin gets the four thousand dollars in cash from Bennett. Reluctantly. I'd like to say it was in a brown bag, but I don't want to take too many liberties here. Who knows? Okay, four thousand reluctant dollars. Small unmarked bills in a brown bag. Merlin says,

'Great, thanks. I'll be back in a week with the paintings.' So everyone else, like thirty artists, are installing all this stuff, putting everything up, and no one can look Bennett in the eyes because they all feel really bad for him having to bag Merlin's shit. A week goes by. Still no Merlin. It's only a few hours before the show. All the other artists are there and have finished with their installs, and are all feeling pretty sympathetic for Bennett 'cause they know Merlin. They know he gets off on torturing people. Bennett is really on edge at this point, thinking that he just BBQ'd four grand of the museum's cash, and is going to get reamed for it. And finally Merlin shows up. In a rental car, brand new rental car, top-of-the-line Lexus convertible or something. Bennett says,

'Hey Merlin! Where the hell have you been? I've been waiting for you, fuck, the show's going to open in two hours.' That's like one breath curatorial time. Merlin says:

'I've got the paintings in the rental car, just come out front and you can help me install them.' And Bennett's like,

'Yes! Awesome! Got the paintings. This is great! Great, this is great. Show's finished.' So they're walking to the front of the museum, and Merlin is looking kind of sheepish and says to Bennett,

'I can't mess with you anymore. I'm sorry. I've got to tell

you what I did.' He says this as he's popping the trunk of the Lexus, which is empty except for a pile of empty designer shopping bags. Merlin is, by the way, wearing a very new, very very expensive-looking outfit. Gucci. Full length Burberry. Mirror shoes. There are no paintings.

'There are no paintings, Bennett.'

'There are no paintings?' Bennett asks. 'What'd you do, Merlin?'

'I went on a wild shopping spree.' You know, he's wearing it all. Loads of new records, and some Hard Rock Cafe stuff for his sister's kid or something, some Kiehl's creams ... and Merlin's like, 'Can you help me bring in the empty bags? I just want to install all the empty bags of the stuff I bought on the floor.' It's called 'Make Your Own Life.'

They go in, Merlin's all geared up in brand-new-life gear, and he just spreads the designer bags on the floor, then stands back and looks at them, you know the way you would admire your painting in the museum, and then rearranges them and thirty seconds later he's like, 'Okay. Perfect.' And Bennett goes,

'What have you done?' And Merlin says,

'Well I thought, you know, that the artist was supposed to get something when they had a museum show.'

Bennett said that's the only piece he ever still thinks about from the show. So that's like the whole story. I mean I probably need to fact check it, but ...

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