

**An Essay That May Be Skipped By Anyone Not Particularly Impressed By
Thinking As An Occupation**

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Inspector1: What's this thing?

Josef: That's my pornograph... er, my phonograph.

Inspector2: What's this?

Josef: What's what?

Inspector2: A circular line with four holes.

Inspector1: (*writing*) Circular...

Inspector2: It's not really circular, it's more ovular.

Josef: Don't write that down, for heaven's sake!

Inspector1: Ovular. Why not?

Josef: (*sarcastically*) Ovular?

Inspector1: We can't not write it down just because you say we shouldn't.

Josef: Ovular isn't even a word.

Inspector2: You deny there's an ovular shape concealed under this rug?

Inspector1: He denies everything.

We are in Joseph K's apartment, as imagined by Orson Welles in his film of Kafka's novel *The Trial*. Welles' embellishment of the room – a scar on the floorboards left behind by the boarding house landlady's late husband's dentist chair – not only affirms the appallingly bizarre nature of the authorities' reasoning, but introduces a sinister sexuality. The scene's sado-masochistic insinuations amplify the oval's labial associations, which might otherwise have been left quiescent to all but the most eagerly or routinely perverse.

The oval is a somewhat ambiguous and elusive geometric entity. It is less specific than the mathematically determined ellipse and more various than the curiously complex yet regular outline of a hen's egg. Indeed, the oval is a figure of fecundity and a precursor of potential. It is robustly generative yet fragilely elegant. And it provides the perimeter for

the vignette, an image that fades or darkens at its corners and edges, thereby pulling focus at the centre. The literary or theatrical vignette comprises a scene or idea isolated from the wider context of the world at large, like the dough lifted away by the cookie cutter from the expanse of life, to be baked into an ingestible story. The oval, then, speaks of the process of communication, or, more specifically, it reflects the anatomy of an idea that has been condensed and parcelled up for distribution.

Simon Bill's paintings break with a tradition of rectilinearity to make use of the oval's connotations of containment and propagation. Their titles, too, compound a suspicion that there is meaning here, in an old-fashioned, strict, immovable, non-subjective way. The titles are stridently authored, unequivocal despite their innate non-sense or non-sequiturs. And it is precisely through the lack of obvious correlation between the words and imagery of *Fruitarian Duvet* (2008), *Born in the Workhouse* (2009) or *4 Euros* (DATE) that we become uneasy. Language generally promises attachment to consensually identifiable ideas, images or objects, but here we are presented with nothing but blind spots and cul-de-sacs within unknowable narratives or bodies of knowledge.

Bill expects good artworks to be a bit like jokes, to appear to compress a cognitive shortcut or leap; they should be 'a stock cube of thought flavour' that can then be extended into a piquant gravy to be poured over the workaday vegetables of life, perhaps. This is not to say that the job of art is to 'spice up' the rest of life. If piquancy is one of art's by-products, this is due to the efforts of those that contemplate it. Just as in *Art and Illusion* EH Gombrich discusses 'the beholder's share', or 'the interpretative activity in reading and accepting notations' in a physiological and intellectual register, the contemplator of art also mobilises its ideological value according to his or her own need, expectation and conditioning. If one looks to art as a signpost of freethinking or a tool for moral messaging, one will probably find it so, regardless of the artist's intent. Bill himself, however, has no interest in the use of art as emollient or consciousness raising tool.

In his novel *The Man Without Qualities* – an immense book that describes the internal wranglings of a man in search of meaning in crumbling fin-de-siècle Europe – Robert Musil describes the process of thinking as like a dog with a stick in its mouth trying to get through a narrow doorway. The idea arrives with the suddenness of the dog's success, and whereas previously this would have been identified as 'inspiration', putting such divine suprapersonal phenomena aside, it is more latterly called 'intuition':

[It] is only something impersonal, namely the affinity and coherence of the things themselves meeting inside a head.

The better the head, the less evident its presence in this process. As long as the process of thinking is in motion it is a quite wretched state, as if all the brain's convolutions were suffering from colic; and when it is finished it no longer has the form of the thinking process as one experiences it but already that of what has been thought, which is regrettably impersonal, for the thought then faces outward and is dressed for communication to the world...'

Bill's paintings seem to distil this process – the arrival of an idea that is not our own occurring at the instant of looking, so that we are not even aware of the convulsions from which it arose. Like the hidden hand on the pulleys and levers behind Kafka's labyrinthine bureaucracies, though, these moves may not be tangible, but neither are they inconsiderable. They arrive as seeds of ideas 'in the head' by way of the eyes, which we might propagate and nurture in the narrative furrows of the imagination or let fall on the stonier ground of formalist sensibility. Either way, though, comparative convulsions are triggered not at the point of conception, but that of reception, as we attempt to assimilate these pictures into our own storehouse of associations and sensations. In this instance, though, the better the head, the more evident it is in the process, as the curious and alert work harder to connect what they see with what they know – or with what they imagine they don't know. Bill's paintings, then, become modes of transport for the probing phenomenaut, who can, by way of these thought bubbles, journey between far-flung

ideas, hurtle along associative corridors and pop up through improbable portals, simply for the joy of it.