

# ZASLOVE AND THE INSURANCE MAN—AN EXPLODED BOOK OF FOOTNOTES

» WILLIE BRISCO

“...‘Quotation’, then is a term that stands at the intersection of art history and literary analysis, a concept that makes preposterous history specific. Quotation can be understood in a number of distinct ways at the same time, each illuminating an aspect of the art of the present and of the past through their distinct theoretical consequences”.

—Mieke Bal<sup>1</sup>

“The experience which corresponds to that of Kafka, the private individual, will probably not become accessible to the masses until such time as they are being done away with.”

—Walter Benjamin<sup>2</sup>

Is it possible to make an installation of one of Kafka’s stories? Prior to seeing the installation, *The Insurance Man Kafka in the Penal Colony* at the SFU Gallery, a friend had already described it to me as “a tangled

mess”. In her words, it was “a bizarre collection of references and paraphernalia, so filled with captions and esoteric detail that would be impossible to collate.” Collating aside, knowing something about Kafka and the author of the installation, the description could only make me smile, in addition to making me want to see the show. This may seem like a strange point of departure, but in its own way it gets to the heart of what was difficult in understanding the installation—could Kafka’s writing be explicated by its expansion into an installation? My answer here is yes: because the author of the installation, who is known for a specific density of discourse, uses a method that is dialectical and poetic that often concludes without easy synthesis.

Much of the analyses that we are familiar with in these critical times is not only dialectical, but can be poetic as well, thereby raising aesthetic questions, perhaps without providing answers. Specifically, in Jerry Zaslove’s classes, literature and photography move through the material, even when they might not be the primary subjects; they help create a complex space where metaphor, history and politics intersect. This installation does that as well; it created a multi-decade history that presented objects by expanding their meanings. The installation transferred much of that phenomenological complexity into the space of the gallery.

The exhibition was like the archipelago of a host of penal colonies on islands that circled the globe. It consisted of a number of “islands” that one could almost visit by walking through the room. There was a slideshow using the archival images of the historic penal colonies and their cage apparatuses—from a book known to Kafka at the time of he wrote the story. There were out-sized quotations on the walls from the story and from Kafka’s other writings, almost like islands of texts, and a large bed sculpture—an island in the midst of walls—all of which combined set design with allegory. Vintage studio photos of celebrities from a Prague portrait studio

1 Mieke Bal, “Afterword: Looking Back” in *Looking In: The Art of Viewing. Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture*, Edited by Saul Ostrow, Amsterdam, 2001, 272.

2 Walter Benjamin, “Max Brod’s Book on Kafka” in *Illuminations*, Translated by Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 146.

contemporary to Kafka graced one wall, and on another wall on the other side of the bed- sculpture were painted portraits that formed another island of contemporary figures who seemed to be spectators to the story; and yet on another wall, anti-war propaganda from WW I illuminated Kafka's helplessness and awareness about WW I's "preposterous history" (Bal) of brutal violence. The exhibition was neither a standard museum display, nor what one might typically think of as an artwork.

*The Insurance Man: Kafka in the Penal Colony* housed a show inside of a show beside a show and yet another show woven throughout the room. The objects on display were positioned in a contiguous manner. This allowed the collection of objects and the writing that filled the walls to be read both indexically and atmospherically. Like an exploded book of footnotes, the exhibition reanimated Kafka through mapping his proximate reality to the collections in the room. The suggested relationships to the collections situated him in his own time in a number of ways. Through the vast collections, the exhibition sought to create an image not simply of Kafka the man, but to his discursive context that indexed and also projected the relationship of the objects to the reality of the surrounding world. The display thus examined how images and objects that were largely situated in his time could annotate Kafka's insurance career and intimate life. Thus the exhibition, created Kafka as an abstraction that segued towards both the totality and margins of his oeuvre. Kafka the social critic, Kafka the melancholic self-doubter, and a host of other identities were able to exist simultaneously in the room. By holding many perspectives at once, the links between objects and their relevance to Kafka strategically created doubt and uncertainty about Kafka and the background to the creation of the story. Objects functioned transitionally with and without a sense of an obvious metaphorical relationship to the story itself. The installation embedded the viewer into a material history of the story. This

might be similar to finding a diary inside of a piece of old furniture. Kafka becomes a free-floating figure of discourse—even of quotation—which could infuse wonder into the everyday objects situated strategically around the gallery. By my referring to the installation as an extension of a teaching style, the parallel style of relating the installation to teaching becomes a strategic placing of Kafka's construction of his stories through the way Kafka and the installation combines different discourses.

Exhibitions we see in galleries these days develop their own ciphers, codes and parsing and often speak to us as literature. There was a cloud of anachronism playing throughout the exhibition, which moved the viewer back and forth through the last two centuries. Touring the exhibition, one was frequently pushed into the past only to be confronted with the present. One found fragments of the world Kafka described in his diaries and letters mounted on the walls and in display cases, only to be led further into the 20th century, where we play out the tragedy of his warnings about the society we have come to live with. For example, in a flat-file display case, a book of drawings done by children, who were confined and then annihilated in either the Terezin or later in the Auschwitz concentration camps, sat there mutely as one of these objects that might be temporally unclear to a spectator. The book of drawings was published as recently as 1993, however its strategic placement in the display case, along with other objects like children's books and travel books from Kafka's own time and place became a "quotation" and a reference to Kafka's interest in children and children's literature and an invitation to remember the murder of Kafka's sisters in the concentration camp.<sup>3</sup>

The discursive space of the exhibition often referred to a history of plunder, torture and colonialism. Viewers were met with a Kafka displayed in

3 Volavkova, Hana, ed. ... *I never saw another butterfly...: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942-1944*, Schocken Books, 1993.

the moment of intersection where self-consciousness towards the violence and chaos of social life begins to crystallize into “quotation” (Bal) that alludes to a language of oppression, incarceration and suffering. Geographically removed from the checks and balances of a watchful culture of law, the island that Kafka created used the abstract geographical location of a distant penal colony to examine the dark potential of unwatched power where power can pursue new and old methods of punishment. Upon this threadbare frontier, the alienating nature of the Colonial European social contract could enter into absurdity with all the gravity and violence that absurdity entailed. We might even see that Kafka the lawyer constructed a judicial case study where the compliant and malleable nature of authority could be made transparent, and the language of Justice and Progress could be shown for the brutality it is often brought to serve as both spectacle and punishment.

The slideshow showing the reality of prison cages, various apparatuses, jungle plantations and portraits of celebrities and groups of prisoners in the penal colonies illustrated a society orchestrated into racialized divisions into the guilty and their righteous keepers. To view the self-imagined reformers masquerading tyranny as progress remains a haunting reminder of the ruthless idiocy and insolent pomp of the human characteristics mimicked in Kafka’s stories. In this way, Kafka’s story also mimics the ideology of progress in the image of the writing machine. This reminds the viewer of the technological ethos of his times almost forcing the viewer to recognize the enlightened historical progress of the technical means of punishment from garrotes and iron maidens to gas chambers and electric chairs. The story reminds the viewer of the morbid truth of the guillotine festivals and lynching picnics and distills and then mobilizes this social violence into a four-person sitcom. Kafka’s “Penal Colony” draws the reader closer into witnessing the grotesque mechanics of this catastrophe. It is from this stand-

point that the exhibition can remind us that within Kafka’s world of the literary words reify into things reminding us that this catastrophe still haunts us. In this, one is reminded that we, as private individuals, remain ever implicated in the relative nature of the violence of our societies, that, as Walter Benjamin writes, in the quote that is used as an epigraph, “will probably not become accessible to the masses until such time as they are being done away with”.

We all know that both the name “Kafka” and the term “Kafkaesque” have become commonplace and have been assimilated into the contemporary vernacular and can “explode” into quotations from those who likely never even read Kafka. We encounter these terms in critical discourse and institutionally both as objects of literature and personal experience. In *The Insurance Man: Kafka and the Penal Colony*, we are offered another view of Kafka, one that mocks the use of the “Kafkaesque” as meaningful anymore, but indexes the many cultural and social images and social variables that bring an author barely published in his own time into view as a minor cultural industry. By situating Kafka into both his and our present, *The Insurance Man Kafka in the Penal Colony* illuminated many of the catastrophic contingencies, which lead to the necessity of “quoting” (Bal) Kafka’s writing in ways that detour any attempts to assimilate him into the culture industry. The installation engaged both the everyday banality of “the private individual” (Benjamin) and the dense, dialectical extensions in Kafka that are used in the installation to criticize the culture industry that has already assimilated him and his work. Mieke Baal’s comment that I quote as an epigraph might be used to illuminate the Installation, and, to further underscore her point, that by “illuminating an aspect of the art of the present and of the past through their distinct theoretical consequences” the Installation avoids the spectacular and the cliché, and in this way Kafka is reembodyed in the room of objects, by being softly bound together by discourse and magic.



Reproduced with Permission of Klaus Wagenbach Verlag, Berlin.





*Ema Destinnova, 1896 1896. Opera Singer.*  
With Permission of Langhans Portrait  
Gallery



*Karel Kramar, 1907 1907; politician, lawyer,*  
*economist.* Reproduced with permission  
Langhans Portrait Gallery.