**SEMANTIKON.COM**… Joseph Winterhalter

A loaded proposition -- in concept, and as an evolutionary articulation.

I first met Lance on an icy November evening in 1998.

Nearing 1207 Main St., he and Flanigan appeared through a frosted street side window as an intrepid - albeit wobbly – pair of novice figure skaters, insistent on choreographing the ice dance ‘routine’ they had doggedly set upon themselves this particular evening.

I was finishing up a happy hour bartending shift, and after some hailing through the weather and a negotiation with the sidewalk, the 2 of them made it inside for a pop. Introductions were made, a few formalities exchanged, brief conversation and - along with a few more Irish whiskeys - the 3 of us lit out up from the basin to Northside and the Comet...

*“What does it matter to us what judgements may later be passed upon*

*our obscure personalities? If we have seen fit to record the political*

*differences that exist between the majority of the Commune and*

*ourselves, this is not in order to apportion blame to the former and*

*praise to the latter. It is simply to ensure that, should the Commune*

*be defeated, people will know that it was not what it has appeared to*

*be up to now.”*

**Gustave Lefrançais addressing constituents, 20 May, 1871**

Around this time – maybe later, sometime in 1999 – I came across the following in an exhibition review, and it has remained an ear worm throughout the intervening years:

“…at the end of the day, the last luxury of the 20th Century is context.”

**CONTEXT**

At its core this was what ***Semantikon.com*** provided. Context. Early ***21st Century*** context…

As a premise it was simple enough.

Embrace the ‘form’ of the storied precedents set forth in the bevy of printed editions of art minded ‘Literary Journals’ produced by loose, avant-garde collectives throughout history. The surrealists, Letterist International, Fluxus and the like – not to mention zine culture, in all of its glorious DIY manifestations – were touchstones. ***Semantikon.com*** was conceived to follow suit. Sort of…

A shout in the wilderness, for sure, but one that staked a claim for - and voiced the validity of - a motley, abstract community of (mostly) midwestern artists.

And while we’re at it - build **SEMANTIKON.COM** from the ground up -- on the Internet.

Throughout the 1990’s, the concept of the Lyotardian “Death of the Grand Narrative” firmly took hold.

An overarching sense that by maintaining a linear arc of the importance of work produced mainly in the major culture centers across the globe, a larger number of voices were being excluded.

The emergence of the ‘World Wide Web’ was poised to combat this – nearly anyone could ‘get up,’ pushing their work out to an audience heretofore practically unreachable. Now, regional ‘micro-narratives’ were not only on equal footing with NYC, LA, London and Paris, etc. – they were locations of innovation - and where the truly exciting work was taking place. We always already had to work -- harder.

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

There’s a joke about being a serious ‘Artist’ in a joint like Cincinnati –

“It’s a great place to get a body of work together -- to take somewhere else.”

Not anymore.

All at once, “Elsewhere” was at our fingertips - via a click of a mouse - WORLDWIDE.

A distillation of our working praxis – firmly rooted in the ‘here and now’ of the time - broadcast internationally. Aesthetic positions became concise articulations of the ***NOW,*** however entrenched. Veteran campaigns engaged through trials by fire: Bolotin, Strange, LaCharity, Flanigan; or nascent, tentative gestures - workshop volleys of the green and embryonic.

Still, all beholden to a firmness of conviction - and belief. And still again, on equal footing.

***Semantikon.com*** was our ‘Mechanism for Context.’

As a website - format-wise - ***Semantikon.com*** exploited the templates laid out by its forebearers.

By pairing a featured Literary Artist with a featured Visual Artist, on a roughly monthly schedule, the site took on an aura of prescience, auto-magically becoming an interrogation of intertextuality. Resonance and disruptions bloomed and withered again, only to reemerge – mutated, viral and more subversive - through the cacophony of voices accumulating within its 1’s and 0’s.

Not a luxury, by any means, but rather an organically manifest situation of ‘CONTEXT.’

Personally, I was fortunate enough to be twice invited – maybe 2 and a half, three times – to have my work, both visual and literary, featured on ***Semantikon.com.***

Granted – some forms translated better than others...

**First one: 2004.**

I work primarily as a Painter, and I make big paintings.

Lance - or Lance and I - hit on the idea of having an online ***Semantikon.com*** feature for a series of recent paintings I had been working up. The online feature, along with a coinciding ‘physical’ exhibition, would run simultaneously, with one feeding off of the other. Logistically speaking, we had a task in front of us.

For the online situation, capturing via photography the scale and subtlety of the new paintings, and the presence of a new technique I’d developed - utilizing a ridiculous number of layers of scraped and buffed oil paint and wax – was, frankly, a pain in the ass…

Long story short. After a few trials - and accepting the compromise that even if the individual painting images opened in a new ‘window’ online, the reproductions were what they were – we cobbled together a handful of images, a couple of facsimile pages of ‘Notes’ and, in hindsight, a wandering non-sequitur ‘statement.’ I hung the show in situ at some ‘Modernist’ high end furniture store I’d been working with, made some posters, and the **‘META-NYM Sequence: 5 Paintings’** exhibition was realized. Glitches and all.

Did it work?

**YES --** insofar as you’d be hard pressed to find at the time any precedent - or ‘model’ - of an artist taking on the uncertainty and ambition necessary to even begin to entertain this as an idea, let alone have it succeed as a viable, emerging exhibition platform. This project was, in fact, relatively uncharted territory.

As an experience, the reach was there: great crowds at the opening and after, with a steady stream of online and in person engagement. I met a few collectors – several of whom have become lifelong friends - and received an occasional email of interest from some far-off locale. It also – indirectly – took me to Paris…

Context? Absolutely. We MADE the context, and it worked.

Still – some forms translate better than others...

2

**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

**Next one: Part I.**

Back to 1999 -- briefly.

I work primarily as a Painter. Primarily.

Adjacent to the visual work, I will on occasion break into a mode of writing – haltingly and belabored, still -*around* whatever it is I’m thinking about ‘about’ painting. Set off during some existential ‘dark night of the soul,’ and accompanied by the incessant reading and re-reading of some semi-obscure - albeit in my mind essential – books, 1999 was overrun by these – what? – episodes of malaise? The paint was drying up…

Y2K, the entrenchment of the YBA’s in Britain; being just a *little bit* older and - seemingly - none the wiser, I was hounded by an indescript, generalized *Fin de Siècle* ennui. I dove in. Hard.

Derrida’s *The Truth in Painting*, particularly the essay ’Cartouches;’ Isou and Debord, over and over, with a soundtrack of *Call Me Burroughs,* Morphineand the Stooges*;* Burroughs’ *Nova Express* and the cut-ups*,* running in tandem with an unhealthy obsession focused on the *premise* of Aronofsky’s film ***Pi.*** These works were exposing a METHOD – they also happened to be seeing *through* me, in order to see me through.

At the time, my studio was a 3rd floor tenement walk-up on E. 13th Street, #8. I was 33 years old, and on the evening of 3 May, 1999 – at approximately 10:10pm – I sat down to write…

I stood up at 7:48am the next morning with an 8-page manuscript: ***13833 Variants of Apathetic Brilliance.***

*“I am interested in the distribution of physical vehicles*

*in the form of editions because I am interested in*

*the dissemination of ideas.”*

**Joseph Beuys, December 1970**

“…*physical vehicles in the form of editions*…”

Of course.

As a ‘physical vehicle’ the ***13833 V.A.B.*** was 8 typewritten pages, collected in a 12” x 9” craft paper envelope. This original text evolved into a self-produced, xeroxed ‘edition.’ A multiple of 33 first generation iterations - copies made from the original text; with a couple of working copies, and 8 ‘Artist Proofs.’

As a manuscript, the content of ***13833 V.A.B.*** lent itself to *a number of possible* interpretations.

Was it a straight, deadly serious artist manifesto? An ‘arch-conceptual’ Baldessarian parody – with tongue firmly planted in cheek? Concrete poetry, wrapped up in an end-of-the-century post-punk samizdat?

It was, in fact, all this and more.

More or less…

*Procedurally, what the text laid out was a proposal for a series of 13,833 individual 11” x 7.5” pieces – artworks - on Arches 140# cold press paper. A number of possible drawings and paintings, material studies and biographical artifacts; miscellaneous notes, novelties - ephemeral odds and ends. 13,833 of them.*

*A visual documentation - and archive - of* ***TIME…***

*Nota bene: In order to secure 13,833 11” x 7.5” pieces, it was calculated that I would need*

*1,730 22” x 30 sheets of Arches paper. Now, that’s an awful lot of raw material...*

And still again - some forms (of ideas) translate better than others…

3

**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

Ideally, the concept behind producing an artwork as a ‘multiple’ is that the piece provides an affordable entry – while maintaining the form of a physical ‘artifact’ - for a broad segment of “the people” to get into an artist’s body of work; and for getting a little bit of cabbage into the artists pocket, while you’re at it.

Beneficial when you set yourself up to ***need*** 1,730 sheets of fancy French ‘art’ paper…

While mass produced – within the scope of the edition – multiples are a mechanism for a more extensive *distribution* system*,* in a manageable, self-contained and portable format; although, by the very nature of a multiples ‘limited’ production, the *dissemination of the idea* will always already be just that – limited.

*Still - and essentially - when considered within the maverick lineage that engendered it, and the motivations of that lineage which it challenged, the* ***13833 Variants of Apathetic Brilliance*** *as manuscript manifests - fundamentally – as a written record of a number of possible IDEAS.*

*And as such, the* ***13833 V.A.B.*** *took on a life of its own, as much as a piece of writing*

*as it lives as --* ***something else, entirely.***

A loaded proposition, again -- in concept, and as an evolutionary articulation.

**Next one: Part II.**

Full disclosure: I have absolutely no recollection as to the how - and vaguely the when, sometime in 2005 – it came to be that Lance approached me to post up again as a ‘Feature’ on ***Semantikon.com***.

Not for the paintings this time, though…

*The* ***13833 V.A.B.*** *had stuck its head out in a few instances between 1999 and 2005.*

*A couple of ‘straight’ readings, parts of which were integrated into a sound collage for a spoken word CD project Flanigan put together; the occasional inclusion in exhibition of some of the individual works on paper, though minimal in number, and somewhat out of context.*

*And then, there was a performance - which injected the* ***13833*** *straight into the soul of Greil Marcus’ Ranters and Crowd Pleasers - at the 5/3 Bank Theater at the Aronoff Center (of all places) for the*

*November 2002 Weston Art Gallery* ***InterMedia*** *series.*

*Slack translations into French and Chinese of the entire text - read by a couple of aspiring ‘actresses’ in short skirts, fishnets and high, high heels; megaphone declarations from a shabby old man with a tin whistle; then a sharp suit rattling off the Notes on the V.A.B.: a situationist ‘cut-up’ of conspiratorial, Burroughsian candor; ruminations and post-modern Beat elegance.*

*Just maybe, it was* ***this*** *iteration that catapulted the piece into the realm of ‘literature’ in Lance’s mind, and mine as well. Regardless, plans were made for compiling the October 2005* ***Semantikon.com***

***‘****Literary Feature’ –* ***Joseph Winterhalter:******13833 Variants of Apathetic Brilliance****.*

Finally – some forms translate better than others.

At this point ***Semantikon.com*** had been hummin’ along for a while, having smoothed out the majority of bumps and bruises it had gathered in its infancy. Lance - being the wizard – continued to tweak and refine the ‘look’ of the site and its interactive facets, as well as the platform overall. It was, after all, an evolving cyber-organism - and things were solid.

We set up a time to meet. I gathered up everything I had relating to the project, fortified myself for a couple of days in **‘*LanceWorld***,’ and set out for Columbus – dead set on establishing, once again…

For me – ‘analogue’ as the day is long, still – this one turned out to be a breeze…

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

*A* *breeze* -- Just like that rushof air that engulfs you preceding the ***heat*** from a concussive blast.

First step was bog standard, apparently. At least in Lance’s world.

As the manuscript was printed on standard issue 8.5” x 11” typing paper, all that was needed to do was to scan each page - and the cover of the outer envelope - into the machine. It was perfectly formatted.

Lance worked some of his wizardry and within minutes – or an hour or two, depending on who you talk to – there was a glowing page of thumbnails on his screen; an ordered, tight grid of 9 images: the craft paper envelope and the 8-page ***13833 V.A.B.*** text. A few spells and conjuring’s later, a click on any image would open up into a new window - revealing a nearly full-size reproduction of the chosen text page. Perfect.

Next, we input a short statement regarding the genesis of the manuscript, messed around with the format a bit. Seamless operation - and done.

The ‘*Notes…*’ however, were where the ‘juice’ was -- or at least where we could squeeze out a mind-boggling context for them -- by indulging in and taking full advantage of the repository of information that was instantly available on the ‘Internet’ of those days. *Necessary information…*

*On stage, the Notes on the V.A.B became a careening, dynamic clarion call.*

*Distorted, megaphoned ‘pirate radio’ transmissions wrestling with the static din of a repetitive and droning - yet clear, straight - recitation of the* ***13833*** *text,**tuned as* ***‘****temp-morts’ translations in*

*French, Chinese and English. A tin whistle bleat in a darkened room…*

*On paper, the Notes on the V.A.B.* *was a dog-eared, typewritten and carbon copied sludge…*

*crossed out, margin filled and crossed out again – non-sequitur wanderings, again –*

*aspiring out-takes maybe fallen from a trash bin at 9 rue Gît-le-Cœur; most likely E. 13th Street.*

*As a ‘shareable’ document - in other words - it needed some help.*

We went to work. Cut some lines, clarified others; rewrote a section here and there, assembling a pseudo-respectable – albeit esoteric, still – version of the notes. Whittled down from the original 3 pages of rewrites to a manageable and webpage appropriate 9 or so paragraphs, Lance introduced – once again – a little more ***‘magic’ -- HYPERLINKS.***

THIS. WAS. IT.

While not a completely foreign concept to me, the latent potential in the utilization of hyperlinks to convey additional, *Necessary Information* – extant, yet *concealed* within a text - was nothing short of a revelation.

*An overloaded filing mechanism – my internal, intertextual ‘soul of the machine’ -*

*could now, at the very least, be approximated. ‘A system of quotation and détournement – embellished and contradictory – in a long, discursive chain…’ come to blistering, anarchic life.*

*Via a document. On the internet.*

*Which emboldened* *‘the dissemination of the* ***idea****.’*

A line as casual as *“is an accident”* opened to the **Library** at *nothingness.org.* The term *“situations”* led to **Bureau of Public Secrets** and ‘Theses on the Paris Commune’ – which in turn made accessible any number of additional, essential texts available at *bopsecrets.org*. All told, we fit 9 hyperlinks (several of which are no longer live…perhaps *‘too dangerous’?*) into 9 paragraphs. These portals offered 100’s - maybe 1000’s more - ancient ***and***modern trails to explore; fleshing out, quite simply –- ‘CONTEXT.’

***Joseph Winterhalter:******13833 Variants of Apathetic Brilliance*** went live on ***Semantikon.com*** on Sunday,

2 October, 2005. One month and 8 days later I boarded a flight to Paris…

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

**Paris.**

90, rue Saint-Martin: 89 steps up a spiral-scratch, opening up to a what amounted to be not much more than a reconfigured rooftop…broom closet.

Still, an ancient, cobbled street below – ‘***la rue Saint-Martin***.’ Narrow, soot-marred and mysterious, alive with ‘*le* *revenants’* haunting – this time - an absence of barricades; though still again - an echo of their presence through centuries, scarring this ‘artery of resistance’ as contested territory.

*That* we ended up ***there*** – appropriate as it may be - isn’t really important. The ***How*** most certainly is…

*The ‘****META-NYM Sequence’*** *had, over its physical run, infiltrated a certain sort of consciousness.*

*The online* ***Semantikon.com*** *feature pushed the work even further afield throughout the year. I was able to get a little cash stashed away, proceeds from off-loading a few paintings and peripheral works related -and then not so much - to the exhibition****,*** *and was itching to “get outta Dodge****.”***

*Not coincidently, I was turning 40 that November…and there was*

*no way in hell I was going to be in Cincinnati when* ***that*** *happened…*

Finding a spot to crash was Priority 1.

I figured I could squeeze out sticking around for close to 3 weeks – if I played my cards right. This needed to be a lean, streamlined Recon mission; a steady, inexpensive base was crucial to making it work.

Research ensued, and hotels were out – even 0-star joints were too much for my ‘hard-scrabble’ budget.

Where to turn now? ***CraigsList.***

*Well before* ***‘Air BnB’*** *turned every sleaze-bag with a shithole into a wanna-be Conrad Hilton,*

***CraigsList*** *was the place to look for Lo-Cal accommodations – anywhere in the world.*

*Community based - truly – as well as relatively transparent and HUMAN. You were still taking a chance,*

*but it just felt more ‘right’ - and real - than the other options on tap…*

Narrowed down to a dozen or so spots, I fired off a bunch of emails in my best pidgin *‘Franglais,’* and then – nothing. Crickets. ZERO. I slowly began to accept that if this was going to happen, I may – perhaps – ***have*** to do this the ‘right’ way -- which is, sleeping on and under a pile of cardboard boxes in the *Parc Vert-Galant* on the *Île de la Cité,* or nearby, under the *Pont Neuf…* the oldest ‘new’ bridge in Paris. In November.

*Tearing through a late season house painting gig – just a little more scratch to pad the coffers –*

*I was doing 12 hours a day, 6 days a week to knock it out, and I was fried.*

*Time was getting tight, and I nearly missed it.* ***The*** *email…*

While cordial enough – *French* *Cordial* – a potential host had, still, a couple of questions.

*La Maîtresse de maison,* Linda, a French-Senegalese expat, had her vetting process honed as sharp as a piece of Damascus steel. Two questions, elegant and incisive: “Why, exactly, are you wanting to spend 3 weeks in Paris?” and “What, precisely, do you - as an American - intend to do to contribute to *la culture française* while you are here*?”*

I threw together a paragraph or two: painting/writing research - along with a few otherideas I wanted to investigate - and *my impending turn of age;* and then the ‘*coup de tète’:* the links to ***Semantikon.com***. With ***META-NYM Sequence: 5 Paintings***and***13833 Variants of Apathetic Brilliance*** added, I hit send.

That was all it took. Sealed it. A couple weeks later, I landed at DeGaulle. Hopped the Métro to Châtelet-Les Halles, and met Linda at *Place Edmond Michelet.* She handed over the keys - and a curiosity. Attached to the key ring was a small bauble, not more than an inch long. A cast aluminum jet, with ‘TNT’ embossed in bright red paint on each side. It was about 9:30am, Paris time. 11 November, 2005. ***Armistice Day.***

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

An approximation of bohemian homelessness would have to wait – and, there was to be no surrender during this particular campaign…

**90, rue Saint-Martin:** 89 steps up a spiral-scratch - an ancient, cobbled street below…

**The Map:**

Passing through the front door to the street, two doors to the right was *Centre Pompidou.* Directly across, *Place Edmond Michelet,* and beyond that *rue Quincampoix*. Walk a bit further and you were back at *Forum des Halles –* a massive, subterranean shopping mall and transit hub - which replaced the teeming arcades and fresh food markets known since Émile Zola as *‘La Ventre de Paris’ --* the‘belly of Paris.’

*Completely by chance – maybe - ‘basecamp’ was just about half a mile -*

*or 750 meters as the crow flies – from ‘Point Zéro des routes de France.’*

*The pin-drop, precise spot from which* ***every single distance***

*in and from Paris is measured.*

*Dead center.*

Bags dropped, we hit the streets… and for the following days, weeks (now a *lifetime?)* each second buzzed and pulsed with - clichésbe damned *–* an *intrinsic* physical and philosophical resonance --***Electricity.***

Early on, the ‘Map’ was a necessary - though not ‘exactly’ an evil - crutch. A formality we needed to indulge if we were going to expedite hitting the hot-spots with the precision this operation called for, as there are certain things one *must* *experience*, firsthand. Besides, there was – still - a lot of work to do…

In no particular order – of importance or chronology – and, certainly, not an exhaustive itinerary:

Our immediate surroundings, the *4ème* *arrondissement,* andthe *Pompidou*, which had opened a comprehensive **DADA** exhibition in early October; the *Musée National Picasso,* complete with a stenciled assessment on the limestone entrance: ‘***N’Futur***’; *Place de Vosges,* and on to the Left Bank.

*Musée D’Orsay –* then over *Passerelle Léopold-Sédar-Senghor* to *le Louvre…* the latter at which I nearly lost my head after standing stone-like and motionless for every bit of an hour or two, soaking in every inch of Delacroix’s ***La Liberté guidant le peuple*** – while the tourists rush by, reenacting that ***Bande à part*** bit…

Up to Montmartre – *Sacré-Cœur* and *le Bateau-Lavoir*; down the hill and east to *Place de la Bastille*. Back across the Seine to the catacombs – “***C’est Ici L’Empire De La Mort.”***

A Métro trip to visit the Eiffel Tower – jumping off the train at *Trocadéro* - providing a down-step garden jaunt past the husk of *Musée du Cinéma – Henri Langlois.* Another site considered ‘*contested territory’ --*

then, an impulse: enact an impromptu bit of situationist street theater - a ‘performance piece’ – unscripted.

Which - unbeknownst to nearly every passerby *-* became a clandestine collaboration with Banksy.

*“In no particular order – of importance or chronology –*

*and, certainly, not an exhaustive itinerary…”*

This statement isn’t - completely - 100% true…

It did take us a few days to get our bearings – negotiating the Métro in particular. Still – map in hand - we mostly walked. With purpose. It became apparent that there was an internal logic working on us – intuitive, maybe – but it seemed to be more than just that. A sensibility dragging us along – ancient in origin. Then, I got it. The layout of Parisian *arrondissements* is a spiral; a series of roughly expanding circles, spooling out from ‘the center of the universe.’ We’d tapped the current, though hadn’t – just yet – begun to drift...

Still, a spark - *“In Girum Imus Nocte…”*

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

**The Territory:**

**90, rue Saint-Martin:** 89 steps down a spiral-scratch - to a narrow, soot-marred street below…

Passing through the front door to the street, two doors up and to the right was *Centre Pompidou.*

Beyond that and heading slightly northeast, staying to the right – **180, rue Saint-Martin,** the second to last Parisian address of Guy Debord.

Early on we’d head out at dawn – backpacks loaded down: books, maps, provisions – deliberate, and with calculated, focused intent. Now, about a week in, we began to run merely on instinct - though I did carry with me an Allan Kaprow-like “flimsily jotted down set of root directions” in the bag, just in case.

***…****technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences…*

*…(a) behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects,*

*and thus, quite different from the classical notions of a journey or stroll.*

*In a dérive one or more persons drop their relations, their work and leisure activities,*

*all their other motivations for movement and action,*

*and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.*

*Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a dérive point of view,*

*cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents,*

*fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.*

*But the dérive includes both this letting-go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by knowledge and calculations of their possibilities.*

***Guy Debord – Theory of the Dérive, 1956***

Now, carrying only the essentials - water, some **‘*ideas to disseminate*’** – it was on.

**17 November:**

Gravitational draw, *a* ***psychic fax*:** *Saint-Germain-des-Prés.* Vestigial remains of ‘*les enfants perdus?’*

On and under *rue du Four.* 51, 47, 34 - 26?  ***24 - Vingt-deux?*** A ‘mythical’ hole in the wall *– Chez Moineau -* suspended in gelatin and silver by Van der Elsken; the dive bar to which all others aspire? No dice.

Now a cheap ‘clubwear’ storefront – all neon leggings and faux – something or other - ‘*faux’* will suffice.

So, we’re off – again, and another not quite accidental - drift. Since - still again - there are certain things one ***must* *experience*, *firsthand…***

***Café de Flore.***

*It was here that the world turned – briefly, and forever - after a few bottles of wine.*

*Beneath the critical eyes of ‘les fantômes de Sartre et de Beauvoir’ –*

*though thoroughly convinced of their full support – my companion on this odyssey and I agreed –*

*in no uncertain terms – that we would get married.*

*Little fanfare, other than a brief ‘potlatch’ –*

***et le mépris bohème et langoureux de nos voisins de table…***

A tidy, *Parisienne* dose of “bohemian, languid disdain…” Sure, if that’s what you need to keep *you* going.

Not us. Not now -- ***‘La beauté est dans la rue!’*** Going deep, deeper into the *5emé* - we found our way through the *Panthéon* on the way back *up* from *rue Mouffetard* and environs*;* and at 51, *rue des Écoles, Cinéma Le Champo* found us. On the screen this evening, at ***22h*** -- Guy Debord’s ‘last’ film, from 1978:

***In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni.***

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

We turn, indeed – *with* ‘*Just A Few* ***More…’***

**21 November:**

*Rue de la Bûcherie* – ‘Street of the Butchers.’

At number 37, just across the Seine from *Notre Dame* and ‘*Kilometer Zéro’* -- *Shakespeare and Company.*

We had stumbled upon a ‘reading’ – “***The Paris Review: Its Strange Past and Sublime Future.”***

Hosted by the late Susannah Hunnewell, Paris editor of ‘*The Paris Review,’* an avalanche of positions fell upon us. From Nelson Aldrich reading from a 1990 piece by George Plimpton to poet Jacques Jouet, a member of the *Oulipo Group* – and with everything in between - sensibilities hit overdrive*. Now’s the* ***time*.**

As the electricity in the room subsided post-performance, I approached a young woman – furtively occupied behind a teetering pike of books - who appeared, still, to be running the shop. On cue – with the attendant ‘*je ne sais quoi’ -* she introduced herself as Sylvia, as I fumbled into my bag and pulled out **– *everything.***

Broadsides and chap-books, Flanigan’s ***VOLK/cspi*** spoken word CD; a few posters I’d made, *a* ***manuscript*** …

“Would you mind if I left a few of these around? Put some posters up?” An emphatic reply, followed by an animated – while brief – conversation. “Absolutely. Please do...”

***Semantikon.com*** had bluntly - apropos of its name, and with the heft of a meat cleaver – landed.

*“Since its founding by George Whitman in 1951, Shakespeare and Company has been a meeting place for*

*Anglophone writers and readers, becoming a Left Bank literary institution.*

*Endeavoring to carry on the spirit of Sylvia Beach’s original ‘Shakespeare and Company’ shop,*

*it quickly became a center for expat literary life in Paris…*

*Ginsberg, Burroughs; Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller… William Saroyan and James Baldwin*

*were all early visitors to the shop.*

*From the first day the store opened, writers, artists, and intellectuals were invited*

*to sleep among the shop’s shelves and piles of books -- unknown, mostly, and early on in their careers…”*

***‘Be not inhospitable to strangers lest they be angels in disguise.’ – G. Whitman***

***from “A Brief History…” – shakespeareandcompany.com***

Another cascade to follow. Our conquest of Paris carried ***us on…***

Rummaging the book stalls and small shops nearby the banks of the Seine, one score was ***otherworldly --***

Volumes I, II and V -- *Œuvres Complètes de Paul Verlaine* 1953; Volume III of the *Correspondance de Paul Verlaine*, 1929, and a few others. Each one with their pages ‘un-cut,’ the collection was wrapped tight, tied together with heavy twine, and pulled from the attic of ‘*ÉDITIONS MESSEIN – 19 Quai Saint-Michel – PARIS,’* by none other than Monsieur Messein’s *granddaughter…*

Drawn around a quick corner we landed on *rue Gît-le-Cœur…* at number 9, *“the* ***Beat Hotel.”*** Now a 4-star ‘boutique’ hotel - *Madame Rachou* long gone – the cobblestones retained, nonetheless, an intensity and oscillation worthy of a Gysin *‘Dream Machine.’* In homage, some would say, I managed to dislodge a small, loose piece of limestone from where the façade met the street -- and I carry it with me, to this day.

*‘ONWARD!’* to an ‘Irish Pub’ on the next corner (sometimes you gotta play the chips as they fall…) Hustling inside, *bonhomie*… We found ourselves amongst a crew: a couple, ‘defense contractors’ from San Francisco; then a Swedish physicist; and, while separate at first, an interesting pair of young French girls – art students at the Sorbonne. Into the night, through liters of wine, the warmth from *Calvados –* ***and on, and on…***

As there are – for one last time – ***certain things one must experience, firsthand.***Like a***Parisian sunrise…***

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I did make one more trip to *Shakespeare and Company*, in order to - *you know* – check things out…

One last, misty November afternoon, I dipped in a doorway, huddled up out of the wind. While I finished a hand-rolled *Gauloises* (it really is the best,)a slow, steady snow began to fall – the first since we arrived.

In an instant - wind picking up - a more rapid fall, now more ice than snow in the mix…

*Out of nowhere a figure materialized.*

*Small, ahistoric in clothing – my ‘shabby old man with a tin whistle’ maybe? Another ‘fantôme d’une communauté’ come to push me along? As he was struggling to clasp the shutters and pull these giant, ancient tarps over the bins -- which held* ***all*** *the books -- I jumped in to help.*

*Now – these were not the cheap, plastic waffle weave tarps we use today; these pieces were works of art. Massive oil-cloth sheets – watertight – and timeless.*

*While it took a ‘minute,’ we were able to get everything secured, as best as it could be.*

*My ‘coworker’ had, it seemed, a method. An experienced hand obviously born from years of repeating this particular maneuver, with a precision that demonstrated the utmost care.*

*Job done, and with an authentic, sincere ‘thank you’ -- he gestured to head inside the shop.*

Shaking off the cold, a barrage of questions followed – *precise* questions - interspersed among several more issuances of ‘thanks.’ I answered best I could - flummoxed and disoriented to be honest - by the inquisitive line of interrogation thrown my way…

*Slightly in a trance – though without hesitation –*

*I ‘auto-pilot’ pulled a last* ***Semantikon*** *handbill, CD, and card form my bag.*

*I caught a brief flash in his eye, then a shift in his visage, overcome by a knowing sense of – well - calm.*

*This calm – an openness - had a certain character to it, as if this man had, actually,*

*known my answers to his questions all along.*

*With a clutch of material in one hand, he extended his other to shake mine as he said*

***“Yes - Hello!! I took a look at all these the other day --***

***I’m George Whitman. Do you need a place to sleep for the night?”***

**27 November:**

Our last night passed with one last *dérive,* each step reinforcing in the deepest sense that this was ***not*** the first time - nor certainly would it be the ***last*** – that these paths had bestowed upon those who partook in their guidance an essential truth. This ***‘Truth’ -*** having been passed down since the 11th century – from *‘the Old Man of the Mountain’* to Burroughs, Gysin; through the splintered *‘Letterist Internationale’* to countless radicals and punks, was the ***lived experience*** of an ancient phrase. A contrarian - and oft misunderstood - declaration that stood for nothing less than absolute freedom: ***‘Nothing is true; Everything is permitted.’***

**28 November:**

4:30am - with little sleep - we jumped on an ***RER*** train at Châtelet-Les Halles, back to DeGaulle.

Our departure would not be an easy exercise in ‘***letting-go.’***

A line of close to 100 passengers clogged the way to security – presently unhostile, probably due to *le café* having not *just yet* fully mobilized their synapses. This calm turned on a dime, though, as *Andie MacDowell* - dragging her daughter behind her – figured it would be a *fantastic* idea to just *stroll* past the backlog. This was not a wise decision on her part. Between bouts and shouts of gorgeous French ***mépris -*** and trips back and forth to the counter – we made our gate with minutes to go. By now - with the flight overbooked - there was only room for one of us. A tough call – but, *sometimes you gotta play the chips as they fall…* With a crisp grip of 800 new-found euros in my pocket - and through the glass on ***her*** way to boarding - I bid my newly minted *fiancé* a fond ‘***Au revoir!***’ For a few hours more – at least - *Paris wasn’t going to let* ***me*** *go…*

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**SEMANTIKON.COM** Joseph Winterhalter

***Context. Semantikon.com*** covered more than just a few positions during its *‘classic’* period of activity.

As a website - format-wise - ***Semantikon.com*** exploited the templates laid out by its forebearers -- the storied precedents set forth in the bevy of printed editions of art minded ‘Literary Journals’ produced by loose, avant-garde collectives throughout history. By pairing a featured Literary Artist with a featured Visual Artist, on a roughly monthly schedule, this *website* took on an aura of ***prescience*.**

The ***idea*** *was to not be limited*, *by any* ***means*…**

In addition to the monthly features, ***Semantikon.com*** carried around in its corner a ***‘***ringer***’*** or two. Indulging in, and taking full advantage of the *potential* that information could manifest by being instantly available on the ‘Internet’ of those days was a loaded proposition. To cover all the bases, Lance had embedded the seeds of a ‘physical’ publishing arm, ***Three Fools Press***; e-books and ‘broadside’ posters -

the work of various contributors, all downloadable, ready to print; a deep library; experiments in sound - occasionally; and a repository of *avant-garde* film and video. It was under this category that my final ***Semantikon*** contribution would find itself, filed under ***‘Semantikon CELL LOGIC: Cinema Lost and Found.’***

**Third one, in full.** **2007:**

*“No film is more difficult than its era.”*

***Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles,***

***qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le film “La société du spectacle”***

**Simar Films**, Paris, 1975

*In 1975, two years after the film adaptation of* ***The Society of the Spectacle*** *had been released -- this brief statement, lodged neatly as a voice-over in Debord’s following film, must have sounded as yet another volley in his contentious ‘anti-career’ -- as easily dismissed as it is dismissive.*

*Now, in 2007 – 34 years after* ***The Society of the Spectacle*** *was first screened – I’m not quite sure of how the game of time has proven Guy Debord prophetic with regard to a film - or any eras -* ***‘Difficulty.’***

*When asked to write a brief introduction to* ***Semantikon.com’s*** *November ‘****Cell-Logic****:* ***Cinema Lost and Found’*** *feature* ***La société du spectacle****, I started to* ***feel*** *like Louis Armstrong’s jibe about jazz- --*

*“Brother, if you don’t get it, there ain’t no way I can explain it to you…”*

*I thought about staggering down the rue des Écoles in Paris on a chilly mid-November evening a couple years earlier, missing a screening of ‘****Société…’*** *at the Cinéma le Champo - then ‘settling’ to settle in to absorb Debord’s* ***In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*** *instead…*

*I* ***wanted*** *to remind myself that the* ***spectacle*** *is not a collection of images, but rather the social relations between people* ***mediated*** *by images. I* ***had*** *to remember that critical theory must still communicate itself in its own language, and for it to be an all-inclusive critique, it must be grounded in* ***history.***

*I* ***needed*** *to remember to forget about living the negation of style, and to – still again - remember how to live a ‘****Style of Negation…’***

*After all –*

*“No film is more difficult than its era. For example, there are people who understand, and others who*

*do not understand, that when, according to a very old power strategy,*

*the French were presented with a new ministry called the* ***Ministère de la Qualité de Vie****,*

*it was quite simply, as Machiavelli put it,*

*‘to allow them to retain at least in name that which they had already lost’.”*

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**“…already lost.”**

Nope, considering *“Once I was young…and could talk with nervous intelligence about everything and with clarity and without as much literary preambling as this…”* -- and as I write this piece, which began straight; a ‘retrospective essay’ -- as Lance referred to it –- regarding my involvement with **Semantikon.com** --

*now its tenor taking on a curious vibe -- [shift linguals // tangle word lines] --*

*as if* ***something else, entirely,*** *has overtaken its production --*

***for it is now the Summer of 2020 -– ‘COVID Time.’***

And not just yet, for in revisiting these projects, activities, ***experiences*** – I’m struck mostly by how much ***we*** ***have* *retained***, to this day ***-*** contrary to the ‘conclusion’ arrived at in 2007 – and not just in ***name*** ***only*.**

And still again - in light of thefinal two paragraphs wrapping up the ***‘Society of the Spectacle’*** piece above, with its *prescience* chillingly accurate – today, each day – as it is necessary for us to not only *recall*, but ***fight for***, the promise - the importance - of what ***Semantikon.com*** put forth into this world, our world.

Which is - that undeniable, necessary foundation for - and of – ***CONTEXT.***

**CONTEXT**

Which, by the very definition of the word, ultimately provides a justification for ***-*** ***everything –***

***ALL*** the deadlines. Miscues and stutter steps; victories – large and small – fires and failures…

***ALL*** the ‘*talking with nervous intelligence,’* the clarity,the absolute necessity to *‘just start at the beginning and let the truth seep out...’* -- each time, and for everyone.

The incessant ***‘Literary Preambling’ –*** the ***experience -*** the ***essence of the story...in context:***

***The ‘Work’ --***

***Semantikon.com: A Community Based Arts Journal***

***This Community****:* Each one of us; including everyone that has crossed paths with it - ***Semantikon.com.***

Each one: an ***initiate*** into ‘***La Société du Semantikon’--*** *through the work.*

Each one: integral to the ***‘Essence of the Story’*** *-- through the work.*

Still, this is not to say that there haven’t been forces utilizing a certain ‘negation of style’ at odds with these collective – and individual - pursuits. In fact, today’s world perhaps may still prove *our* works ***‘prophetic’*** with regard to any eras ***‘difficulty.’*** Against this formidable - yet fluid, slippery - adversary, these pursuits, their resonances and disruptions…withering again, only to reemerge – ***again*** – *more* mutated, ***even more*** ***subversive***, have hardened their roots…

Since, of course:

*“Avant-gardes have only one sole moment;*

*and the best thing that can happen to them is, in the fullest sense of the term,*

*for them to have* ***made their moment.”***

***Guy Debord – In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni, 1978***

So, as ‘we turn in a circle in the night, and are consumed by the *fire*’ - ***Semantikon.com*** made its moment.

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And, by having made its moment – one time - ***Semantikon.com goes on,*** making its moments, *forever* – by striking within an existing, *shifting* *context:*

*What does it matter to us what judgements may* ***still*** *be passed upon*

*our obscure personalities? If we* ***still see fit*** *to record the political*

*differences that exist between the majority of the population and ourselves,*

*noting these differences now may* ***be in order*** *to apportion the necessary*

*culpability in the future to the former, and to acknowledge the latter for their foresight…*

Which, as an ***evolutionary concept***, as an ongoing enterprise -- embodies a loaded proposition. ***Still***.

Then *still -* again – by actively pushing to give voice to its *Initiates*: the latest ones - each one – an integral participant in a timeless lineage, ***Semantikon.com*** has become ***more*** fortified, as its wells run *deeper*.

This storied ‘***Cadre’:*** a motley, abstract assortment of *‘****Artists’*** – our actions firm, and steeped in ***history – will endure.***

***Semantikon.com endures.***

With the work undertaken – in any form – it carries on.

The ***idea*** carries on…

In retrospect. In action. In archival form. In our hands***.*** In this world -– and worlds to come.

We ***move*** – ***onward*** - doing nothing *other than that which we have always already* *done* –

which is, to ***‘KEEP ON!’***

*As such****: KEEP ON!***

***–*** with ***experience***,

* with the ***work***,
* with the ***soul of the machine,***
* with an ***insistence of context…***
* with ‘***La Société du*** ***Semantikon.’***

***For:***

*“It is simply to ensure that, should the Commune*

*be defeated, people will know that it was not what it has appeared to*

*be up to now.”*

***Now*.**

And still again.

And always…

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Joseph Winterhalter

Cincinnati, Ohio

June/July - 2020

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