“How am I to sign myself?” On the Art of Robert Buck

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On a sidewalk near the entrance to a gallery on East Pender Street in Vancouver, British Columbia, visitors to Robert Buck’s exhibition encounter a makeshift shrine. A motley collection of stuffed animals, scented candles, framed photographs and poems sit alongside fresh carnations, dahlias and lilies. Some flowers are airbrushed bright fuchsia or purple. Others are plastic. Cellophane balloons, a plastic angel and a ceramic flowerpot in the shape of a wide-eyed doe are among the disparate objects. Public displays of grief like this appear in response to untimely deaths, sometimes connected to the site of a bicycle or car accident. Other times they signify the collective mourning of a widely known loss of life, such as a mass shooting at an elementary school or a suburban Cineplex. These kinds of memorials were common sites in the weeks following the massacre that killed twenty first-graders and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012. Viewers of news reports on television and digital screens witnessed images of communal shrines springing up in sympathy around the globe. The images were visual accompaniment to audio reports that attempted to relay, or even humanize, the events. This shrine in Vancouver, in front of this gallery at this moment, while cause for pause and reflection, is, unfortunately, not out of the ordinary given the culture of increasingly widespread violence.

When entering Robert Buck’s exhibition at the Rennie Collection, periodic but distinctive sounds of gunshots greet visitors. Their source is not obvious, out of sight and coming from somewhere at the rear of the gallery. But the sounds contribute to an unease already initiated by the shrine outside. The work *Untitled (Daly Over/Under @ Close Range w/.12 “Punkin’ Ball” Slug) (Entrance and Exit)* (1999) hangs to the right of the entrance. It is a diptych with two spiral-bound drawing pads. A hole made with a “punkin’ ball” slug pierces the centre of each surface. The hole produced by a shot entering from the front is roughly an inch in diameter with gradations of blacks and greys radiating from its dark core. Delicately variegated marks appear as though drawn by chance with mushroom spores or flower pollen. The pad shot from the reverse is forced outward like a budding blossom. Violent acts made these marks. But the surfaces are left paradoxically beautiful.

Hanging on the wall opposite, *Apart from the Whole (Communion)* (2005) is eleven photographs united in the form of an oversized composite frame, the cheap kind used to gather together snapshots from proms, weddings or family picnics. The images are cropped photos from the First Holy Communions of a Catholic boy and girl, including close-ups of hands clasped in prayer or holding a songbook. References to both father and mother are present in a few images. In one photo, the shadow of the father screens across the son’s body, making its mark at the precise moment the image is taken. In another, the father’s right hand rests on the son’s shoulder while, in another, the mother is seen holding sunglasses. This underlying visual terrain emerges from the larger pictures of childhood events (to which we are not privy) visible through squares, rectangles and a single, circular frame where the praying hands of the boy are pictured. This circular opening recalls the classical tondo of Renaissance painting, a form traditionally reserved for religious portrayals of mother and child. While these symbolic rituals of purification are portrayed in *Communion*, physical attempts to cleanse are etched into the surface of *Untitled (Clean)* (2004), which hangs nearby. This shiny steel bathroom partition bolted flush to the wall implicates spectators as they enter the exhibition. Removed from its original function of dividing public toilets and guiding social behaviour, spectators catch their hazy, fleeting images in the reflective surface, cast among various scratches and patches of colour.

As the sounds of gunshots continue to resonate throughout the gallery, spectators are lured further into it. The life-size drawing *Two-Pin Toggle (“The Modern Man’s Guide to Life” by Denise Boyles, Alan Rose, Alan Wellikoff)* (2001) hangs at the end of a corridor. Using charcoal on one large sheet of paper, the artist reproduces an illustration from the book *The Modern Man’s Guide to Life* (1987) that instructs readers (presumably adolescent males) on how to be a man. This drawing is an enlarged version of an illustration of how to capture small animals. The two-pin toggle is a trapping technique where small, notched pieces of wood are looped with string and placed into the ground to make a snare. *Two-Pin Toggle* shows us how masculinity is deeply inscribed at an early age through a discourse buttressed in images and language.

Turning attention away from the drawing, spectators discover the video *Untitled (Dec. 29, 1993)* (1999) installed in a dimly lighted corner behind the stairwell. And, here it is, the origin of those sounds of the discharging rifle. They emanate from this anthropomorphic audio-visual installation where spectators stand before the video, looking directly into a black-and-white screen of throbbing white concentric circles that recall the constricting and relaxing muscles of a pupil or sphincter. Stamped with the date and time, “Dec. 29, 1993,” the video is a result of a fully-functioning, automatic lens that continually recalibrates in search of its subject, a subject forever fleeting because the cap remains on the lens. Spectators eagerly watch and wait for a representational image to fulfil our increasingly desperate reliance on the visual for understanding anything. Spectators contend, however, with the mesmerizing, target-like circles of libidinal energy while they listen, ever so carefully, to the muffled voices of two men intermixed with low rumbles caused by wind tickling the microphone. We hear the anxious, impatient voice of a father instructing a son on how to shoot a gun while the son, in turn, gives lessons to the father on how to operate a camera. Their brief exchanges include debates over how to hold the gun, if it is in a locked position and some confusion about whether or not the camera is on. Their words are interspersed with an uncomfortable silence interrupted by that sound heard since walking into the exhibition: a gunshot⎯louder and more intense now.

I. [*I always speak the truth*]

These works of art were conceived and produced by Robert Beck before the self-nomination, in 2008, from Beck to Buck. His practice defies categorization and thwarts the usual mechanisms for identifying an artist through a particular style, medium and even a name. His sculptures, drawings, paintings, texts, videos, installations and exhibitions appropriate familiar forms⎯like a makeshift shrine and an illustration from a “how to” manual. The artist draws on the belief associated with those forms in order to disrupt expectations of them. Spontaneous public memorials, for instance, are accompanied by the basic understanding that someone died. And, in turn, someone cared enough to mark that event and subsequently other people cared enough to buy, make or leave a memento in remembrance of it. Part of the experience of a sidewalk shrine assumes all this is true. *The Shrine (from e to u)* (2000/2013), which spectators encountered before entering the gallery, promises the appearance of such. It demands the same as any other sidewalk shrine; to be experienced as a response to a tragic event. However, when spectators realize it is not specific to an actual event, such as Sandy Hook, the form speaks a partial truth of what we come to expect from it. The appropriation eclipses assumptions embedded in these kinds of familiar forms and as artworks they become openings with potential for revealing broader political and social implications connected to their existence in the first place.

The political in the art of Robert Buck, however, is not an obvious critique of, say, gun control. Buck’s art does not seek to make specific judgements on these conditions. We don’t learn his position on guns and, in fact, need to question if that knowledge is important for responding to the work. By reframing and recontextualizing the familiar, the political in his art surfaces in ways that utilize the spectator’s experience of reality, their understanding of the way things are, and juxtaposes it within a topology that charts a physical and mental course of reading the exhibition by moving and thinking through it, even if it reaches out of the gallery onto the sidewalk. Buck arranges the exhibition as a topology to draw together inherently partial truths that individual works speak. *The Shrine* has no more political bearing than any other makeshift memorial, unless it is inserted into the realm of art and understood amongst other works in an exhibition, such as the video *Dec. 29, 1993*, the photograph *Communion* and the drawing *Two-Pin Toggle*. When these works are encountered in the context of one another, they read like a text where each signifier-cum-artwork becomes part of a sentence exploring the sweeping structural effects societal institutions, such as family, race, sexuality, religion, media, education and language, have on politics and culture⎯the way we live now. This combination of familiarity and confusion leverages that sweet space of a critical aesthetics. And that is where the political rests. That is what has the potential to change perceptions of the world. When visitors exit the gallery they read *The Shrine* differently than when they entered.

*I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.*

These words are part of a televised interview with the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. In January 1973, the young academic and analyst-in-training, Jacques-Alain Miller, asked Lacan to do the interview because he “wanted Lacan, just once, to speak to the common man.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Originally broadcast under the title “Psychoanalysis” on a French government TV network, the two-part program was simultaneously published as a book titled *Television*, which is the organizing framework for this text on the art of Robert Buck.[[2]](#footnote-2) *Television* is divided into seven sections and, like the televised program, full of playful responses, cryptic comments, serious ruminations and incongruent statements by Lacan that reflect the “comedy,” as he says, of summarizing psychoanalysis. Indeed, his quizzical and surprising appearance on screen⎯tinged with satire⎯signals an awareness of the impossible, even ridiculous, task of talking generally about the private practice of psychoanalysis for public consumption. Throughout the interview, however, he does exactly what was asked of him; he performs the psychoanalyst figure.

Psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan is reconstituted out of Freud. But unlike Freud, for Lacan consciousness becomes irrelevant to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, according to early Lacan, is a means for reading, witnessing and coming to terms with the unconscious⎯as it is. Lacan’s fundamental axiom is that the unconscious is structured like a language. That, however, is something of a paradox: language is also what allows a reading of the unconscious and thus a discourse of psychoanalysis to even exist. So while the unconscious can never be fully elucidated or reconciled, it can be apprehended through its traces––slips of the tongue, jokes, bungled actions, dreams. Instances of the unconscious that surface in reality are half-truths with the structure of fiction that take shape and significance through a shared dialogue between an analyst and a subject. This exchange is based on language that manifests through free association, through what the speaking-being has to say. Analysis, therefore, is a critical reflection of the discourse, or social links, where the human subject has no choice but to speak, as manifested through the traces of the unconscious, which ciphers and processes each moment of every single day. Lacan’s broadcast on television promised a position of teaching about psychoanalysis. But it partook in a refusal of that promise because his appearance was in actuality a performance of failure. And, that failure reflected the logical impossibility to adequately communicate an understanding of the unconscious and define psychoanalysis.

*For there’s no difference between television and the public before whom I’ve spoken for a long time now, a public known as my seminar. A single gaze in both cases: a gaze to which, in neither case, do I address myself, but in the name of which I speak.*

II. [The unconscious, *a very precise thing*]

In Buck’s exhibition spectators ascend the stairs to a second-floor gallery. Here, they enter an enormous space with soaring 11.8 metre ceilings where the photographic series *Thirteen Shooters* (2001) is installed from floor to ceiling opposite the entrance.[[3]](#footnote-3) The large 17.8 by 9 metre gallery combined with towering ceilings reflects a basilica-like architecture, accentuated by the apsidal backdrop of pictures of young men. Thirteen movie-poster-size inkjet prints of individual portraits of teenage boys utilize appropriated photographic imagery and text. Our attention is drawn immediately inward and upward toward this altar/shrine where the casual arrangement compares to images cascading from the sky or scrolling down a laptop screen on Tumblr. The portraits command⎯actually, demand⎯an extraordinary visual power over the experience of the entire space. The pictures are colour and Ben-Day dots, cropped from various newspapers; some are more formal yearbook photos or personal snapshots drawn from photos taken at sporting events and family gatherings. Others are decidedly journalistic, taken at hearings or when exiting a courthouse. Beck provides captions for each image. But the words do not reveal the given or paternal names of the boys. Instead they are names of media sources and photographers: “Reuters,” “Corbis Sygma,” “Associated Press,” “Elaine Thomas⎯AP” and “San Diego Union-Tribune.” Front and centre and confronting the spectator’s gaze head on is a diptych of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold; the same iconic photos that emblazoned television screens in the late 1990s, following Columbine and today permanently archived on Wikipedia. In this installation these portraits act as centrifugal forces toward which the other photographs of young shooters gravitate.

Although *Thirteen Shooters* has a different boy pictured in each of the photographs, the range and variability of portrait types represent the singular identity construed by the media of the iconic teenage shooter. In other words, just hours after a mass shooting, photographs of the perpetrator from kindergarten, grade school, soccer matches and high-school proms are invariably rounded up for public consumption. The ensuing days find more photos from an arraignment and sentencing. The media edits and formulates a composite identity of a shooter by circulating these kinds of images with speed and acuity.

While Beck withholds names of the boys pictured in *Thirteen Shooters*, the sculpture *Artwork by Kip Kinkel for His Parents Bill and Faith* (2004), in the same gallery includes real names in his exploration of the combined effects of family and media on the formation of identity. In Oregon in 1998, Kinkel’s shooting rampage took the lives of his mother and father and two high-school classmates. *Artwork* combines the ubiquitous forms of “welcome” and “bath” mats; each cast and presented in a way that resembles headstones. These sculptures are moulded out of white silicon. Seven bullets cast of wound filler, a waxy substance used to fill the holes in bodies as they are prepared for public viewings at funerals, are scattered across the surfaces. The number of bullets equals that used by Kinkel to kill his parents, six for his mother and one for his father.

Hanging nearby, text and image also intersect in a series of “diagnostic” drawings by Beck. The drawings are based on published sources of a variety of different psychological tests used to assess a subject’s personality. One test is called the House-Tree-Person (HTP) personality-assessment technique. The psychologist John N. Buck developed it in the 1960s. Subjects are asked to draw the above-mentioned objects and then respond to an extensive list of questions about what they drew. A qualitative evaluation of the patient is based on subjective interpretation of their responses and images. These works by Beck are a combination of actual drawings by patients and comments by their analysts, all rendered by the artist in his own hand. Beck uses latent fingerprint powder, the same dusting agent that police use at crime scenes, to fill in various background areas and make fingerprint smudges.

Also included in this gallery is the sculpture *01/25/04–Shots No. 12, 13, 14 (Daly Over/Under at Close Range with .12 Gauge “Punkin’ Ball” Slug)* (2004). It is made with three plastic, 25-gallon buckets, rammed full of flesh-coloured wound filler. Comparable to the drawing *Entrance and Exit,* Beck discharged at close range a single shot in each bucket; this time deep into the fat-like substance leaving a cavernous hole in the material bulging up and over the circular rims. The very substance used to repair wounds, here adopts a corporeal quality, punctured but in fact irreparable. Opposite *Thirteen Shooters* is *’ccused of K (The New York Times, Nov 30, 2002)* (2003), a 2.6 by 2.1 metre reproduction of a doe-eyed teenage boy with beautiful curly locks looking forlornly and directly at the spectator. The image was appropriated from a newspaper article about the two King brothers⎯Alex and Derek⎯who in 2001 were accused and convicted of killing their father as he slept in a La-Z-boy. Beck has meticulously reproduced, by hand, a section of the article. These works speak to a culture of celebrity worship not limited to movie stars, teen idols and sports icons, and where the lessons of masculinity explored in *Two-Pin Toggle* and *Dec. 29, 1993* go completely awry.

*He thinks as a consequence of the fact that a structure, that of language⎯the word implies it⎯a structure carves up his body, a structure that has nothing to do with anatomy.*

Language structures our reality. For Lacan, the unconscious is a precise thing because it manifests within the contingencies imposed upon us by language. Through speech and because of speech, we cannot fully realize desire and something always remains of it in the unconscious. This immersion in language is both a permissible and prohibitive factor in our negotiations between everyday life and the unconscious because language is never able to completely convey what we want it to say and do. Within a consideration of the function of language, Lacan’s theory of the symbolic order is often called the “Name-of-the-Father.” According to this theory, which is based on a reformulation of Freud’s Oedipal complex, societal law is determined⎯literally and metaphorically⎯by the name of the father. Our name comes from this paternal law, which is the very foundation upon which we learn to name and understand the world. It is the first experience we have with language, and that initial encounter is determined by the circumstances of family, the desire for the mother, the “no” of the father. For Lacan, it is through the paternal function of language that social behaviour is ordered. However, he later reworked the paternal law as the “Names-of-the-Father,” pluralizing it to reflect its singular function for every single one of us. Self-nomination holds the potential to create new links beyond these governing forces of family. The new constellations reconfigure the subject’s existence in language, opening up new possibilities for its binding effects to become undone, reconstituted through the symbolic act of re-naming. As an invention, that act is a reclamation and reorientation of desire.

III. [*Being a saint*]

*One thing is certain: to take the misery onto one’s shoulders is to enter into the discourse that determines it, even if only to protest.*

In the gallery adjacent to where *Thirteen Shooters* is installed, the order of the family is a predominant theme. Installed in the centre of this space is the sculpture *Wall Ceiling (“Bless This House…”)* (2004). The work is a cross-section from a larger architectural whole. An insulated wall, inverted, stands upright with the ceiling positioned at a right angle to the floor, appearing as though excised with utmost precision. The modest, even cheap, quality of this wall and ceiling is comparable to ubiquitous American vernacular, suburban “rec” rooms. Beck’s recontextualization of this anywhere, anyplace architecture is a playful challenge to the values associated with American family identity and the physical and symbolic stability invested in it. A framed poem hangs upside down on the wall: “Bless this house/Oh Lord we pray/Make it safe/By night and day.”

Five large-scale, grainy photographs are installed on the perimeter of this gallery and radiate with watchful intensity around *Wall Ceiling* and the spectators.These large-scale, black-and-white silver gelatin prints are titled *Screen Memory* (2004) with parenthetical titles *Father’s Room*, *Mother’s Room*, *Brother’s Room*, *Sister’s Room* and *Family Room*. The series’ title refers to Freud’s theory of memories from childhood where seemingly insignificant details are stand-ins or screens for more significant childhood experiences and events. Each photograph is characterized by simultaneous reflections of different domestic spaces that become overall surrogate portraits of family members. *Mother’s Room*, for example, has an iconic image of Jesus Christ looking piously downward with dark curtains partially pulled open and reflected in the glass of the dime-store reproduction. *Father’s Room* is an image with a picture of a pair of geese soaring into the air while shutters and the afternoon sun filtering into a dusty room are revealed in its reflection. Although *Mother’s Room* hangs in close proximity to *Father’s Room*, they are installed on completely separate walls. *Brother’s Room* has an eagle and American flag; *Sister’s Room* includes a prominent image of a unicorn. The artist’s room, however, is conspicuously absent.

*At this point I will interject a remark. I do not base this idea of discourse on the ex-sistence of the unconscious. It is the unconscious that I locate through it⎯it ex-sists only through a discourse.*

IV. [*These faint gestures by which one tries to shield against my discourse*]

Beck’s *dust (Community Times, June 20, 1965)* (1998/2013) consumes a 17.8-metre–long, 1.4-metre–wide passageway dividing two galleries.In this immersive, restrictive environment a 13-metre wall is painted floor to ceiling with dark, slate paint to create a chalkboard surface. Written by hand, with white chalk across the surface of the entire wall, are texts⎯articles, advertisements, obituaries and classifieds⎯from an edition of the *Community Times*, which was the artist’s hometown weekly, dated June 20, 1965. Most of the words are erased leaving a hazy filter through which the spectator’s eyes wander across the surface, while physically moving through the space of the corridor and trying to make sense of the partially effaced texts. Beck’s symbolic and real assault on how we know and exist in the world draws upon and unites experiences with education and media. Added to the conflation of classroom and newsprint here, a small, framed Polaroid photograph hangs on one wall. The snapshot signifies literal death in the image of a child’s tombstone that lures spectators down the passageway where religion, education, memory and media collide in a singular immersive moment.

*dust* is simultaneously construction and defacement of language; a physical gesture against screens of interpretation and editing that guide and define our understanding of the world from adolescence to adulthood. And, we stand here before this towering wall of language where the partially erased text reflects a truth understood by what is present as much as absent in overlapping modes of remembering and forgetting.

*Affect, therefore, befalls a body whose essence it is said is to dwell in language⎯I am borrowing plumage which sells better than my own⎯affect, I repeat, befalls it on account of its not finding dwelling-room, at least not to its taste.*

V. [*This knowledge in as much as it does not think*]

The evidence of erasure is permanently etched into the surface of *Wall Hung Urinal Screen (“Big Red”)* (2003), a bathroom partition, like *Untitled (Clean),* removed from a place of dividing spaces and male bodies in public-toilet stalls. Here, in the gallery the partition becomes an abstract painting and sculpture hanging perpendicular to the wall, which spectators must negotiate in a different manner. The precision with which the artist has replicated the form generates an uncertainty as to its place as art or artefact. Its off-white enamel paint is marked with phrases such as “Jerk Off,” “MOTHERFUCKINGMINT,” SEX ME MOMMY” and “BIG RED.” The latter scratched next to a rudimentary drawing of a gigantic penis. The words are visible within the context of *Mother’s Room* and *Father’s Room* in the adjacent gallery and from opposite perspectives. These transgressive acts are common sights in high-school bathrooms where boys engage in recurring performances with school officials over use of walls for disseminating uninhibited speech. Produced anonymously, texts and images in public bathrooms⎯however temporary⎯symbolize the release of latent desire without the usual burdens of societal censure.

*There lies a chance for us to be in touch with the real pure and simple⎯as that which prevents one from saying the* whole *truth about it.*

*Hidden Pictures (At Rest)* (2004) is also in this gallery. It is a 1.2 by 2.8 metre graphite drawing on paper based on the “Hidden Pictures” page of the American children’s magazine *Highlights*. Functioning on a less formal diagnostic level than the House-Tree-Person personality tests, the monthly journal started in the 1940s using crafts, jokes, puzzles and games to educate children who search between the lines of a drawing to find random objects such as a ballpoint pen or fish defined by contours of bigger scenes such as a farmyard or vegetable market. *Hidden Pictures (At Rest)* is based on a page called “Corn City,” a fantasy city fashioned out of corn cobs. The caption instructs children to look for a snowman, palm tree, candle, scarf, campfire and a boy, among other images. Beck erased everything but one image in the larger illustration. It is a child’s body resting horizontal in the furrows of a road, as if disinterred. Hardly the “boy” one might expect to find in a playful children’s game. To the right of the overall scene are several feet of blank paper, an empty space⎯a void⎯inviting futile attempts at seeing something that helps clarify this uncertain scenario. While the diagnostic drawings sought meaning in the texts and images, there is nothing here to explain this unsettling scene, which is extracted⎯or highlighted⎯from the larger picture of things.

*Who doesn’t know that it’s with the analytic discourse that I’ve made it big. That makes me a* self-made man.

VI. [Knowing, doing, hoping]

In 1974, Lacan performed a refusal of identity on television. His presence on the screen promised to define psychoanalysis. But, in essence, he withheld a quick-and-easy explication from the mass-viewing public by refusing to reduce a complex body of ideas and knowledge to a single explanation. In 2008, the artist Robert Beck changed his name to Robert Buck. Artists too perform different expected functions in order to satisfy different constituents that include dealers, collectors, museums, art fairs, academia and critics. These constituents form the “institution of art” that projects demands onto the artist figure. The artist figure is human capital. And human capital is raised and maintained through a continual public performance of identity, which includes lecturing, exhibiting, writing, travelling, socializing and teaching. These performances contribute to the overall perception of the artist, helping him to retain economic and cultural value, remain relevant and legitimize himself as the artist figure.

Artists participate in a performance of this discourse. For a mid-career artist such as Beck there was already considerable infrastructure built around that identity⎯the brand “Robert Beck”⎯and the assumption of its ongoing performance. The transformation from the artist Robert Beck to the artist Robert Buck was a provocation to this discourse, disturbing and decentralizing the institution of art that attempts to thwart that kind of challenge through its ongoing perpetuation of singularity, of subjectivity, invested in the belief of a name as identity⎯embodied in the signature of the artist.

The extraordinary attention to building and maintaining individual identity is not limited to the realm of art. The early to mid-2000s left us with an unprecedented emphasis on the marketing of individual identity and the personalization of digital personas. The corporate names (let alone functions) of Myspace, YouTube and Facebook signal the placement of the individual above all else.[[4]](#footnote-4) In our current predicament, emails and social-network posts are trolled and then analyzed in algorithms that supply and placate us with consumer choices we have actually told information capital we want. Technology constantly tailors and refines our buying habits through the words we write in Gmail, the things we buy on Amazon, watch on Netflix and hear on iTunes. One need also consider the number of artists whose last names are followed by the suffix “.com” in website and email addresses that inherently assign a commercial value to the identity of the artist. In an era of relentless attention to identity, especially the individual consumer of all things⎯education, fashion, information, image and health⎯we fall prey to the singularities assigned to us.

The artist develops out of these complicated circumstances of history and commerce that are reinforced by the institution of art. Capital is an organism inextricably linked to human desire. Contemporary society is fuelled by systems of production and consumption where capital exploits our desires in order to move itself forward, just as Freud theorized the pleasure principle is the underlying libidinal pulse of our every decision and action. The artist figure is required to step before the public in various ways to communicate with and touch the consumer. Through formations of erasure, editing and partial truths, the self-nomination of Robert Buck challenges conditions related to the identity of the artist figure, casting shadows over governing structures in art and language that define being artist.

*Must I repeat that it is only in relation to a discourse that such a subject can be truly located, namely in relation to something whose artificiality concretizes it.*

VII. [*What is well-spoken, one conceives it clearly*]

“How am I to sign myself?” writes James Joyce to his lover Nora Barnacle in the close of a letter from 1904. The uncertainty associated with this simple question reveals a knowing awareness of the limits of language and its power over the determination of identity. Ostensibly the same question prevails throughout this exhibition by Robert Buck where works gathered together explore various processes of identity, from the diagnostic drawings, *Thirteen Shooters* and *dust* to *Hidden Pictures*, the *Screen Memory* photographs and the lithographic series *How Am I to Sign Myself* (2008), the title of which departs from Joyce’s quixotic inquiry. Buck’s *How Am I to Sign Myself* is a print in twenty-four parts that includes the names of visitors to the 2007 exhibition of the same title at CRG Gallery in New York City; his last exhibition as Robert Beck. Utilizing the readymade form of his dealer’s letterhead and the ubiquitous guestbook, Buck appropriates the names of visitors, drawing attention to the periodic practice of presenting a body of work to a mass-viewing public. *How Am I to Sign Myself*, the first work to follow the self-nomination from Beck to Buck, shows the stream of exhibition goers identified by their signature. Unlike the absence in his series of *Screen Memory* photographs, the artist is absolutely present here with the signature “R. Buck.” Just as Joyce’s letter to his lover finally closed with the statement “I won’t sign anything at all, because I don’t know what to sign myself,” Robert Buck’s self-nomination with the simple change “from e to u” stakes a claim against the engrained belief in the guarantee of identity.

1. Jacques-Alain Miller quoted in Catherine Liu’s online description of the event, “My Lacan is Burning: Revisiting ‘Television’” (2004), organized by *Slought Foundation*, http://slought.org/content/11175/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The interview was recorded and edited in October and November 1973 and later broadcast in March 1974. The book *Télévision* by Jacques Lacan was first published in French by Éditions du Seuil (Paris) in February 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Thirteen Shooters* was made in response to an invitation by the Queens Museum of Art in New York to create a new work based on another in their collection. Robert Beck chose Andy Warhol’s *13 Most Wanted Men* (1964). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Myspace was launched in August 2003; Facebook was launched in February 2004; and YouTube was created in February 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)