

BOOKS

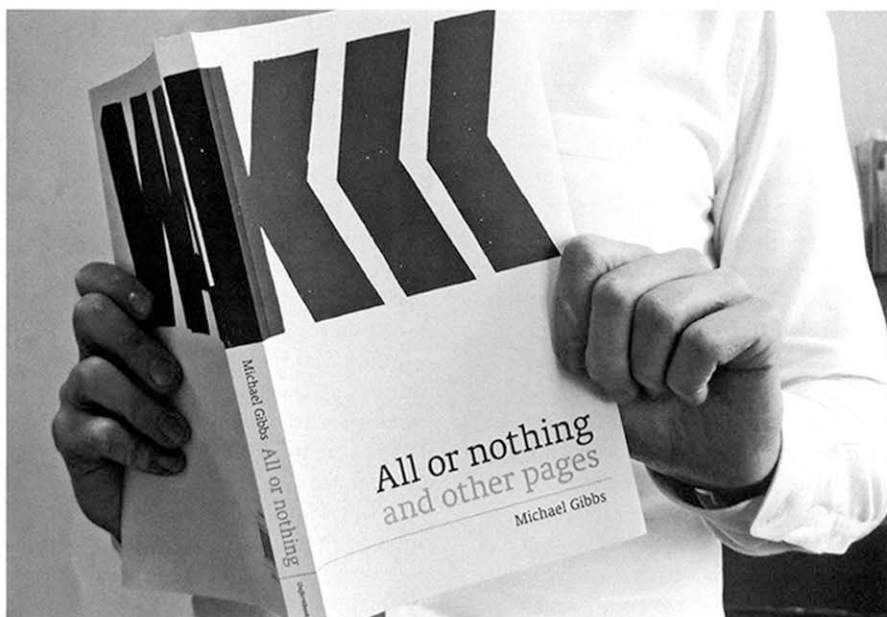
Michael Gibbs: All or nothing and other pages

Michael Gibbs (1949-2009) operated to one side of the mainstream modern art world. His art world, he wrote retrospectively in 1992, 'did not rely on galleries, glossy magazines, state support or wealthy collectors for its circulation since it possessed its own dynamic'. This posthumous compilation chronicles the life work of someone who always practised a principled disregard for maintaining his place competitively within a cultural hierarchy.

Gibbs did not come from the visual arts field, having studied English and American literature. His lifelong preoccupation was with texts, writing and books. In the early 1970s, finding himself in the West Country, close both topographically and temperamentally to the Beau Geste Press community of printers and publishers, Gibbs began to make and distribute a handmade magazine of international visual poetry. He already exemplified his own statement of 1976: 'A small press edition is a sacred object, evoking reverence (or at least respect) for its author, editor, and printer (who may all happen to be the same person).'

The cover of this book features Gibbs's first ever concrete poem from 1965, the era of literal cutting and pasting. Gibbs has formed a graphically kinetic version of the word WALK from uniform shapes of cut black paper or card. Like a street sign conveying a performative command, it is a genuine 'concrete' poem, in the original sense of the word – self-defining, austere, impossible to render in another typeface – and it makes a perfect book cover. Gibbs did not publish it until 2004, but typically he had never discarded it. There is no 'typical' Michael Gibbs artwork or poem. His performance works are similarly various – they were rigorously non-theatrical (following the ethos of the Fluxus event scores), dry and physically lightweight, making something out of not much. As Andrew Wilson says in his introduction, much of what Gibbs did was 'predicated on play and his engagement with the avant-garde spirit of chance operations'.

The title of this collection, *All or nothing*, is that of one of Gibbs's essays reprinted within it. Painstakingly researched and relayed with touches of his dry humour, the essay in question is a historical survey of the decidedly odd genre of publishing books consisting entirely of blank pages. As originally published, twinned with an entirely blank booklet of the same size and weight, it amounted to much more than just a historical



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study. It was an artwork, and probably Gibbs's key work. It was about nothing and everything.

The distinguishing characteristic of Gibbs's praxis in the longer term was that after he had moved to Holland in 1974 to live and work, he actively and theoretically embraced the developing world of digital culture (he created the first webzine in Amsterdam). But as John Held points out, Gibbs did not abandon his deep-rooted relationship with print on paper after the advent of the internet. It is not easy to think of many artists who have understood and fostered the links between the pre-digital and post-digital worlds, usually considered separate. Of Gibbs's years in Amsterdam, Guy Schraenen says here: 'The intellectual spirit of the international avant-garde art scene, which Michael Gibbs belonged to, was a far cry from today's celebrity art market. It is for this reason that such a critical and independent artists' network is so often overlooked, despite it being indispensable in defining the intense and creative atmosphere of the open and cosmopolitan Amsterdam at that time.'

This survey is structured like a sandwich. Its pictorial central section reproduces a gamut of Gibbs's works: his early concrete poetry, typewriter art and language art, action poetry, installations, self-published books as artworks, Fluxus-style book events, mail art, his later critical photo-works and the two magazines he published. Around this section are wrapped two different kinds of supportive material, beginning with 14 of Gibbs's own thematic critical essays and commentaries (including nine of the columns published in *Art Monthly* between 1986 and 2009) and closing with eight accounts by people who knew him, including some valuable contextual surveys within areas not often accorded in-depth scrutiny these days: Gerrit Jan de Rook on concrete poetry, Guy Schraenen on artists' books, and John Held Jr on mail art. The architecture of the book works together with its design – a model of satisfying clarity and restraint – to reflect the manifold nature of Gibbs's practice without being confusing or inconsistent. It contributes a thorough reappraisal of Gibbs's multiple profile as artist-critic-publisher. And if you have come to Gibbs's way of doing things for the first time through this publication, it will make you wonder why his achievement has been lying unassumingly under the radar for so long. ■

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