

Hart
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INTERNATIONAL

<H>ART is a young and fast-growing Belgian print magazine for contemporary art. It wants to keep up with the contemporary expressive art scene in an alert and accessible way. Now in its third year, <H>ART starts working more internationally. That's why we offer a <H>ART International section, with contributions in English or French. Therefore we selected some good international writers and/or critics, who use their expertise to report about the contemporary expressive art in their region or country. It wouldn't be only the reviewing of a certain artist or exhibition (although it is allowed when it is particularly interesting), but the critical pointing to new artistic trends and evolutions in the art scene the critic likes, linked to social, political and economical context. On the other hand, Belgian photographer Jean-Pierre Sloop pictures the most relevant and interesting contemporary art events of the Belgian contemporary art scene.



FRANCESCO GENNARI 'LA DEGENERAZIONE DI PARSAFAL (NATIVITÀ)' 2005-2006, GLASS, WOOD, FLOUR, STEEL, CLAMPS. DIMENSIONS RELATED TO THE SPACE, TENDING TO THE INFINITE. COURTESY GALLERIA ZEPPO, MILAN.

The work of Francesco Gennari

SELF-PORTRAITS OF A DEMIURGE

A black parallelepiped – virtually a cube – has sides made of painted glass held together by steel clamps. Once the clamps and the plates are removed, the form reveals its interior: compressed by the force of the clamps, 80 kilograms of flour have been compacted to recreate the perfect geometric shape of the external container. From now on, this regular solid will slowly crumble, changing its shape over time in different ways, depending on external factors, and finally disintegrating into the incalculable individual grains comprising the flour. I consider this work, 'La degenerazione di Parsifal (Natività)' (Degeneration of Parsifal – Nativity), 2005-2006, a manifesto of Francesco Gennari's artistic practice. The 35-year-old Italian artist usually produces works that are the result of careful sculptural investigation added with philosophical and aesthetic instances that create a very specific and accurate style.

The work we are describing here is typical for the artist's practice, it is a kind of 'Gesamt Kunstwerk' that sums up research not only into the personal parameters of sculpture (e.g. use of the cube typical of minimalism, which – paradoxically – is combined here with an organic material that leads to its collapse), but also the physical laws governing the universe. It is a sort of 'Big Bang': a preformed 'order' that degenerates into 'disorder' subject to entropy and the force of gravity.

DEMIURGE

That said, however, 'La degenerazione di Parsifal' is also the starting point for investigating a mode of operation that the Italian artist has implemented in recent years: artwork as a demiurgic act. In Platonic philosophy, the Demiurge – the 'Great Artificer' or 'Fabricator, the Architect of the Universe' – is an ordering force that transforms and shapes 'things' but does not create. According to Plato, the Demiurge somehow gives form and order to the 'Thing', enlivening and making it the soul of the universe.

Without referring directly to Plato's version yet starting from it nevertheless, Gennari has created an utterly personal version of the Demiurge, in which he himself is the centre of a personal cosmogony that generates a new value system and a new order. In the case of 'La degenerazione di Parsifal', the artist explains that: "The process that is implemented has a metaphysical outcome because the external structure of the cube isolates the content from the reality around it and preserves the internal order, ensuring 'shape immobility'. What I want to underscore here is not the actual process that leads to the demiurgic outcome to be achieved, but rather the analysis of the moment in which this outcome is compared with what surrounds it. In other words, without the structure that the creator has used for his 'project', he must relate to a pre-existing system, moving toward the very moment in which the metaphysical will be forced to regress, betraying its fixity. This is the moment of conceptual and formal ambiguity in which a pure idea begins its contamination, its corruption. It is the moment of metamorphosis, when the order imposed by the creator gives way to the physical laws of the universe".

More simply, this is to say that the cube will crumble so that it will evolve the geometric perfection created by the artificer. The cube will

gradually become a shapeless heap ...and yet this degradation to chaos will represent the formation of a new cosmos: an alternative order. Indeed, the work's parenthetical title is 'Nativity', as the abandoned flour – which is not inert but organic – will foster new forms of life, generating the larvae of flour moths.

All of Gennari's works – and not only 'La degenerazione di Parsifal' – are demiurgic deeds and, in effect, many of them are presentations of the Demiurge in the form of the artist's self-portrait. Despite the fact that, by definition, a self-portrait generally shows parallels between the shape or the subject that is represented and the author, Gennari's instead have abstract and geometric forms. They suggest the artist's own presence only because the demiurgic aspect coincides with the figure of the artist, who has invested himself with that role.

GIN

The substance which represents in its purest form the demiurge is the 'spirit' – in the sense of the alcoholic liquid that, given its tendency to evaporate, engenders intangibility. Gennari has for practical purposes chosen for... gin. Gin is immersed in various sculptures and it seeps into the materials, so that they and their forms – even if abstract and geometrical – can conceptually become self-portraits of the artist. 'Autoritratto con Menta' (Self-portrait with mint), 2007, for example, is a circular sculpture: a large well-turned steel ring lies on the floor and its interior has been filled with a mixture of gin and mint syrup.

'Autoritratto tra un quadrato e un triangolo' (Self-portrait between a square and a triangle), 2006, is a black marble sculpture uniting two basic forms from plane geometry (the square and the triangle) that have been developed lengthwise. The sculpture is laid on the ground after being steeped in gin for hours. The alcohol deeply penetrates the material and slowly evaporates when the work is displayed. Moving inside and outside the matters, the artist (represented by the gin) seems to enjoy presenting himself in different forms and places, living within those forms only to re-emerge from them. In essence, he forces them to exist conceptually in the three different physical states: solid, liquid and gas.

All of Gennari's works seem to reside in a strange dimension, suspended between past, present and

future. His sculptures exist on both a permanent level, due to the use of durable materials (marble, steel, bronze), and a transitory one, because of the organic substances that often penetrate them: not only alcohol but also flour, cream, sugar and soil.

Thus, they are at once physical and metaphysical. As objects in space they require a temporal relation 'he et mine' (here and now) that is thus also a physical rapport with the viewer. Yet another side of their nature – and this is evident in 'La degenerazione di Parsifal' but intrinsic in his self-portraits – pushes them to go beyond their physicality: evoking past actions yet also those of the future. Many post-sixties artists have investigated the relationship between immanence and transcendence. Most of them have done so by creating works composed of perishable materials such as fruit and vegetables (Mario Merz, Urs Fischer) or ephemeral ones such as the natural elements of water and fire (Allan Kaprow, Paul Kos, Cai Guo-Qiang), which are thus consumed. Unlike the approaches of these other artists, however, Gennari's involves creating objects that remain fixed and unchanged in space and time, while they allude to action that is merely potential, as it does not occur manifestly. Their paradoxical value lies precisely in the impossibility of verifying the truth of the relationship between action and things, container and content. In the end, who knows if the gin has indeed been added and, if so, if it will really evaporate? Who will actually see it happen?

SUSPENSION

Gennari's works – simultaneously tangible and not knowable – ask observers to embark on an act of faith, or, as the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested, to give themselves over to something similar to the "willing suspension of disbelief" for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith". This is a semi-conscious decision on the part of the viewer – or, in Coleridge's case, the reader – to set aside disbelief and accept the premise as being real for the duration of one's relationship with the object.

The Italian artist's sculptures question their relationship with the viewer, who is confronted with an object that, while complete in all its apparent forms, conceals part of its appearance, forcing him or her to perform an act of faith. They also examine the relationship between artist-creator/

artwork-created because, once created, the work emerges from the unique will of its maker and, even if it seemingly remains inert, it acquires a 'life' of its own.

Fluttering in the air and occupying real (physical) and assumed (metaphysical) spaces, the Italian artist's works tend to take over the world around them. This is especially evident in one of his most recent works: 'Il luogo dove non c'è più posto per la coscienza' (The place where there is no longer room for consciousness), 2008, made of little silver pearls, is a flat sculpture representing the details of the architectural elements of the artist's studio. Here the artist has reproduced all the key aspects of his studio (corners and columns) with geometric accuracy, so that they are identical to the actual setting. When they are presented in different places, all of these elements expand into the universe, yet they continue to interact architecture wise, just as the real columns and corners do in the space of the original studio. What the artist seems to build here is a kind of diaspora of the studio, which represents the artist's mental dimension, expanding infinitely in space. As a result, the space ultimately coincides with the studio, becoming the product of Gennari's mental dimension.

The procedure used in 'Il luogo dove non c'è più posto per la coscienza' represents another key aspect of an artistic practice for which all artworks, even if self-sufficient and independent, are part of a bigger 'plot' that houses all of them. As if they were different elements of an aesthetic-physical and yet mental landscape, the works are some sort of epiphanies of a personal thinking: a Weltanschauung, inevitably pagan, whose center is definitely art and above all the artist.

Vincenzo DE BELLIS

is an Italian critic and curator.
Work of Francesco Gennari is on show from march 15th till may 30th
in Museum D'Onof-D'Onof, Dourle-Belgium, www.onofworld.be

16. INTERNATIONAL

5.03.2009 <H>ART

The relation between art and money in Italy

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

'Disponibilità della Cosa' (literally 'Availability of the Thing') is a sculpture entirely realized with fifty euro banknotes. It was especially conceived by Stefano Arienti and Cesare Pietroniro for their exhibition 'Regali e regole. Prendere, dare, sbriciolare nei musei' (Gifts and rules. To take, to give, take a peek on the museum) held in 2008 at MAMbo (Bologna). If one wished to join the project one could hand in a banknote and receive in return a certificate and a contract signed by the two artists. Drafted with the help of a lawyer, the contract unites the public to the artists and to the destiny of their work, establishing the allocation of every gain coming from the project itself (25% for each artist, the remaining 50% divided between every contributor). Blending peculiar aspects of both Arienti and Pietroniro's work (the first one is renowned for his paper sculpture, the second for his experiments with money and an active interaction with the public), 'Disponibilità della Cosa' confabulates in the same object monetary value and artistic value in perfect equivalence.

Recently the issue of the value of the artwork, and more specifically its relationship to price has come into the foreground, affecting more and more the artistic practice. The art system is ever more conscious of the market flow, making it a subject of investigation in the comprehension of the present, calling it into question and even suggesting alternative solutions. The artists become conscious that not only the price, but value itself is variable. The art market has become oversized: international fairs, biennials and festivals are proliferating worldwide with unpredictable speed (it is possible to count at least approximately sixty main international events); art auctions kept – until recently – breaking records almost every month. Attention towards contemporary art, within a broader and complex cultural sector, is definitely increasing, with a larger audience and a growing concern on the part of public institutions and investor. According to a report by Nomisma, in Italy – now the fourth country for art investments in the whole world, after

USA, UK and France – the modern and contemporary art market exceeded in 2007 1.8 billion euro, and the average price of artworks raised 5.8%. Still, art is not just undergoing the effect of the economic system. On the contrary, it is adopting economy as one of the most compelling subjects of its research, and with the wish to see a gradual integration of the art system within the global market, it establishes reciprocal interactions between society, cultural policies and economic value. Within this framework contemporary art is torn between reflecting on and playing the money power game and building an autonomy from market and institutional practices.

EUROCENT

'Regali e Regole' took place inside SpazioGAM, an area of MAMbo conceived as a space of strong interaction with the city and the local community, where 'Disponibilità della Cosa' could play a particularly significant role assuming as its aim an inquiry into those artistic practices able to respond to contemporary questions about authority, the value of an artwork, its distribution and conservation, and its relationship with collecting and fruition of the public. Besides MAMbo exhibition, two other main shows took place on this theme, respectively at PAN (Palazzo delle Arti – Napoli) and CCCS – Strozzi (Firenze). In Naples too, the thematic cycle 'The common good', organized by Julia Draganovic, tried to establish a contact with its context with the first show entitled 'Impresa dell'Arte' (The Art Enterprise). The main idea behind the concept of this exhibition was an interrogation in regard of the possibility of art to be a form of 'capital', and to reflect the economic trends. A group of international artists tried to respond to these questions in different ways: Claude Closky concentrated on stock exchange growth rates, while Damien Phelps realized a sort of visual diary of expenses and earnings; 0100100110.org presented their Nikeplatz project, the perfect example of a fake promotional campaign, and the collective Finger sug-

gests bee-keeping as an alternative income for Naples' inhabitants. Moreover, Christian Jankowski raised the budget for his catalogue by investing at a casino, to remind how much hazard is present within every transaction. Particularly interesting was the initiative 'Centesimo Avanzato' (left over cent) by Susanne Boesch: through the collection of the smallest contribution, a cent, the artist proposed the fulfillment of a public project for Naples, a dream suggested by the citizenship itself, invited to express its wish during the whole time of the exhibition: eventually one of the manifold proposals will be realized with the money collected this way.

Contemporary art has become a specialized and competitive industry with its own rules and a network of professional operators. This assumption was the starting point of 'Art, Price and Value', the exhibition curated by Piroščka Dossi and Franziska Norti at Strozzi, Firenze. On display were works that tried to shed light precisely on the mechanisms of the international art system, in reference to the economic field and the relationship between its different actors. Art system superstar Damien Hirst displayed the door of his former restaurant The Pharmacy, opened during the nineties. What is interesting here is the ability to reflect on the speculative nature of business art practices. Hirst demonstrated this by putting on sale at Sotheby's all of the restaurant's furnishings after its failure. Wilfredo Prieto too showed his hand on economy with the installation 'One Million Dollar', composed by two mirrors and one bill, insured precisely for one million dollars. Takashi Murakami played instead with the notion of brand, revisiting Luis Vuitton monogram (LV), and then embedding it in a series of paintings, establishing a new form of equivalence in between art, marketing and life style. With a definitely different approach, Michael Landy reverses the market functioning, setting up a production line that instead of assembling products, destroyed them in sequence. Destroyed was all what the artist owned in his life till the age of 37, objects of

desire taken to pieces and transformed deliberately into trash, as in a ritual of liberation from possession and build-up of goods. A possession that can always turn out to be a catastrophe, as in Aernout Mik's video about stock market slumps.

The urgency behind all these investigations lies presumably in the drastic change in the rules and scale of the art system. Subject, for example, to the emergence in the limelight of actors that were on the margin just a few years ago, like the rise of contemporary Eastern art and collectors on the market. In recent years, in fact, with pressing demands for the new and sensational, the Chinese and Indian contexts have become the ideal environment for speculators, and the process of production and commercialization has sped up extraordinarily. And this is not the only novelty concerning an art market in ceaseless evolution. It is Damien Hirst, again, who found the way to move around any mediator between the artist and the purchaser, and decided to sell his works straight in an auction, bypassing art dealers and every other passage usually interposed in the sale process. Purchasers and collectors, after all, are changing too: they are coming from every part of the world, and their average age is increasingly young (between 30 and 45). The point is that investing in art is becoming particularly profitable in the context of financial crisis, when real estate and stock exchange sectors seem too uncertain, while artworks can guarantee the possibility to be sold back after years at a higher price (often ten times more than its initial price). Banking houses, in fact, promptly created a department devoted to art investor consultancy, often in cooperation with major auction houses.

INDUSTRY

Nevertheless, it still seems hard put to consider art as a business, not only at the level of public opinion, but also in regards to museum management. Needless to say it is not easy to determine if this is a good thing or not. Anyway, there is a move in this direc-

tion, as a recent conference held in Prato, at Centro Pecci, under the meaningful title of 'Art is industry' made clear. The circumstance was the presentation of a PriceWaterhouseCoopers report, the first specific study about art's economical status in Italy, ordered by Confedilaura (Museum Service Operators Association). The report describes the richness of the Italian cultural heritage (with more than 3.400 museums, about 2.000 archaeological areas and 43 Unesco sites), and the numerous opportunities coming from art as an asset for the tourist industry, and therefore as a value for the whole economy. Hence, the aim of the conference was precisely to assert the not negligible role of art as a productive activity, to be sustained and funded by public institutions. Notwithstanding the wealth of its cultural legacy, the creative sector in Italy reaches only the 2.6% of national PIL, in comparison with the 3.8% in the UK or 3.4% in France. In the matter of contemporary art, in particular, despite the growing interest it gets, weaknesses are evident and numbers remain low. This situation is reflected also within the allocation of state funding, primarily assigned to protection and conservation of cultural heritage, rather than to the development of contemporary initiatives. The report suggests some possible ways of development for this sector, linked mainly to merchandising activities, cultural tourism and new technology enforcement. But, if on one side culture needs its economical value to be recognized and its potential within the development of a territory sustained, the risk to subdue artistic activities to financial profit – pushing resources that can be considered just collateral as regards true research – is still round the corner. After all, even immateriality has always its price...

Gabriella ARRIGNONI

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Maurizio Cattelan 'Untitled' 1998

Maurizio Cattelan shows one of his installations, an old olive tree planted on a monumental cube of soil, in the art centre Bozar (Brussels). The work is part of the collection of the Castello di Rivoli, the famous museum for contemporary art in Turin. Cattelan created the art work in 1998 as part of Manifesta 2 in Luxembourg (curated by, among others, Barbara Vanderlinden). As so many other works by Cattelan, the piece shifts between ingenuity and intellectual theft, between charged symbolism and light-footed play between the slowness of art history and the swiftness of the image industry. Cattelan brings a piece of reality (in the form of a stock image of Italy) inside the museum and creates a 'living sculpture'. But he does so at the end of the 20th century, in a time when artistic strategies of that sort are already tested to an extent that the effect risks to bore the viewer. And yet his installation is spectacular and appealing; it is completely at ease with its own many-sided impossibility. This untitled olive tree is in fact a parody of a failed project by the legendary Italian artist Alighiero Boetti. His 'Monument for Agriculture' (1968-1970) would have consisted of a 25-meter-high earthen column on which an apple tree grew. He investigated, in collaboration with engineers of Fiat, the construction of the monument for over a year, but it was impossible to realize. In the meantime, Italy had spawned yet another artistic myth, a myth Cattelan gracefully refers to in his own daring act.

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INTERNATIONAL 17.

Art between commodity and narration

THE ARTIST'S TOUCH IN TIMES OF CRISIS

When Yves Klein exhibited 'The Void' in 1965 he drew on the opening night a crowd of three thousand people. The room has been painted white, all furniture was removed. Save for an empty display case. Lined up in front of Iris Clert Gallery the public waited anxiously for their turn to see an empty room. The question is: Why? We know the consequences of Klein's gesture. But what was there in that empty room – nothing? Brian O'Doherty suggests that all avant-garde gestures have an audience that was there and an additional one: the majority of us who were not there. He further argues that those who did attend are the ones deprived of the full experience, are even bored due to their seemingly privileged position of being in the midst of it. Those pioneers become immune to what happens around them, but the rest, the absent ones who learn through narration are entitled to perceive the event flawlessly. Dr. Albert C. Barnes, an American inventor and art collector took a peculiar, strict approach towards art viewing. He insisted that the art works available through the Barnes Foundation could not be photographed. Singular black and white reproductions appeared in print, but deprived of color they sent a clear message to the viewer: a confirmation of the fact that they were not experiencing the real thing. Dr. Barnes was surely right. The texture, the colors, the size – they all play a major role and a direct inspection must be an unrivaled way to know art when it is contained within the object.

PROCESS

Now let us take Fla Baeckstrom's 'A New Order for a New Economy – To Form and Content (The Acts of Artforum Re-arranged)'. She took out the advertisements from one of the most influential art magazines only to place them in a new order – that of the color spectrum. How much more do you need to know in order to experi-

ence it? That she did it in a major New York gallery? That they were put up high and around the showroom? That it was well received? The bare title conveys all necessary information.

When A.L. Steiner does '1 Million Photos, 1 Euro Each (minimum order)' do you actually need to see what is in the pictures? Even if you bought it and signed the lifelong contract for an ever-evolving installation, would it be for the pictorial values? Does it matter what size the photos were and whether they were in color or black and white? In fact you don't ever need to physically interact with the subject – all you need to know is that there are one million photos to be commissioned, they cost one euro each, and they come in bulk. Of a million.

The reader may well be aware of such practices, initiated by Duchamp and his 'Fontain', the original of which has been lost or – more likely – thrown out as rubbish. The postulate is to turn toward thought rather than craft. That must by now be obvious and fundamental. What is of concern is the relationship between the spectator and the spectacle, the viewer and the viewed. Art no longer resides within the object. Art as a commodity is worthless and empty. That, however, should not mean that there is no art per se. It can now emerge freely as a process. It could be compared to an afterimage or afterthought – it appears as an intangible wavelength. Art is now mediated, not exhibited. Still it can be capitalized. A prime example of such capitalization was the 5th Berlin Biennial 'When Things Cast No Shadow'. The show purposefully avoided the commodity character of art. Yet the supposed emptiness of the spectacle in turn fueled the brains with pure artistic experience. Detached from the object, the art was there as a process.

POETRY

Art is closer to poetry now than it has ever been. Artists are now those very

poets that Plato wanted to remove from the society. Their role – abstracted and imprecise – is futile. Their work – creation and commodity free – is void. The bourgeoisie is fooled. Their money is no good here – it can no longer buy ownership of art. A major hoax is about to be revealed. But as we will see further, being in a close relationship with poetry does not mean – paradoxically – a distance from reality. What the visitors of the 5th Berlin Biennial were given seemed to be genuine 'Kapital' – but it was pure economy in fact. The bubble appeared to be working properly. Illogically and contrary to all analysis it not only functioned but even delivered a profit. A 'major ferment' as the cultural nomenclature would call it. Economy seems to be working on that very same mechanism as art is. Experimental and sovereign it declares its rules on the fly. And it is not about the method, but the effect.

Close ties with the economy are just as visible in the artistic life, as they are in that of the bourgeoisie. For corporations such as Nike it is no longer of concern to deliver a product, they market a brand instead. Whether it is identity, prestige or a relationship it is all summed up in the words of a former British Airways chairman, "to go beyond function and compete on the basis of providing an experience". The customers will be satisfied not by what they come in possession of, but how this is done.

Supposedly there is on average a 100 year delay in the appreciation of art by the masses and about 50 in the understanding of them. Hence the popularity of impressionism and hence the label 'conceptual art' for anything that lacks aesthetic value, not to mention an object-character. Hence also the reason for isolating 'contemporary art' from all other art. But those are issues of the hermetic language of art and will be resolved in time. However, it might be an issue of the inability of visual representations to deliver substance to those unskilled in the field.

The 'art object', just as any other product, has been overexposed and exploited by hyper-mediated reality. University of Chicago economist David Galenson suggests even that the merit of a work of art can be estimated by how often it has been reproduced in textbooks on art. Under such circumstances the importance of a particular work of art would become quantifiable. Paradoxically that sort of pragmatism is incompatible with the prevailing system.

STORIES

Consciously or not, artists set out to generate a new quality. If anything can be reproduced the value of the act of representation diminishes. So does the value of the reproduction and in turn that of the reproduced, which becomes trivial. In effect the meaning is lost and the art piece becomes an empty object. That is not to say that images of artworks are wrong, not even that they are distracting. That is to say that they are incomplete.

To aim for what cannot be reproduced would be easy, academic, and above all self-destructive. It could be a singular act, a manifesto with a limited purpose. An ephemeral gesture may well be a beautiful one, but if it is silent it cannot communicate and therefore it forfeits. What cannot be told ceases to exist. A successful parameter is one that does not need to be reproduced. Instead it can be told.

Art has always been unquantifiable. But when commodity free it also becomes harder to sell – I deliberately avoid the word 'impossible' because in business you never say never. And selling is a matter of telling anyway. Just think of the stories by Alan Greenspan, Ben Bernanke or Bernard Madoff. Like great artists they believed in the experience relieved of matter. They gave up logic, abandoned reason and their stories were beautiful – only unreal.

The experience is what is of quality. The more commodified the art is, the less accessible it becomes. The strength

of an artistic gesture lies in its ability to be told. Art that avoids the object is not new in its method. What must be new though is the way it is reported. A picture is not worth a thousand words, a picture is worth what can be said about it. The act of telling cannot be overestimated. That is not to demand solely spoken art. That would be too limiting in form and too short sighted. Art is entitled to the use of any language or medium. For translation is what renders the best narrative. The term 'Postmodern' first appeared simultaneously with the 1973 oil shortage. It was a change of paradigm and the conditions were self-reflective. There is no such term in art as 'crisis'. New methods will flourish if old ones fail, both in creation and in transaction. The value of an artistic gesture depends on its ability to generate art as a process. The value of an art object is none other than that of a fetishist speculation.

'Budget Story' is a video by Polish artist Oskar Dawicki. The artist received a grant of 14000 PLN for the realization. The film lasts about 10 minutes. First you can hear him talking to the crew. Then the stage is being built, lights are being set, the actor is being dressed. Four counters in the corners of the screen tally the steadily decreasing budget. When there are barely any funds left the actor comes out on stage and reports, "We will shortly run out of money". There is just enough of it for three shots, then the counters reach zero, money is gone, film ends.

Bartek KRACIUK

is an independent art writer currently based in his home country Poland.

Robbrecht & Daem, pacing through architecture

The renowned Ghent architectural bureau Robbrecht and Daem will be in the limelight this spring at the Centre for Fine Arts Bozar in Brussels: you can view a monographic exhibition devoted to their work. 'Pacing through Architecture' is the first in a new series of exhibitions presenting Belgian architects at the Centre for Fine Arts. Five short films by the director Maarten Vanden Abeele bring to life five key projects by Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem. The films enter into a dialogue with the sketches, plans and photographs on display, contrasting the slow pace of the creative process with the rhythms of the buildings in daily use.

In Bozar Brussels, till April 18th, www.bozar.be
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18. INTERNATIONAL

5.03.2009 <H>ART



THOMAS ELLER. FOTO MADINE DINTER

Artist studios often hide behind nameless doorbells. Thus, judging by its doorbell panel, the refurbished factory building in the Lobeckstraße in Berlin-Kreuzberg is a very creative place.

Since 2004 you have been leading double life: first, as founding editor of the on line art magazine *artnet.com* and as an artist, and now as artist and co-director of the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. Has this ever caused you any problems? How do you write these two professions?

Thomas Eller: "I was very surprised – and also quite flattered – when Hans Neundorfer, CEO of artnet asked me to bring artnet to Germany in 2004. Until then I had been a full-time artist. I took on the challenge, because I felt that the art world had changed so much and I needed to take a different approach. Although, at first it seemed contradictory to make art and to appear as its critic, I quickly learned to strictly separate my two functions."

So, one day you were an artist, the next a paint-stained overall?

Eller: "Yes, kind of... I either appeared as Mr. artnet or Thomas Eller. Of course some people knew me from both functions, but when I was in one role I stuck to it rigorously – it's a question of

credibility. With my new position as co-director of the Kunsthalle, it's becoming even more difficult..."

Since you could technically organize a solo-exhibition of your own works?

Eller: "...on the level of time management, I mean. Even though I am the artistic director, I need to convince the other people involved in making those kind of decisions – an entire advisory board of museum directors and the Kunsthalle's co-director."

A day only has twenty-four hours. How do you work two full-time jobs?

Eller: "Well, I cannot just simply switch off my artistic side. It accompanies me everywhere and always. Art is a way for me to communicate and deal with certain experiences. For example, the work 'THE incident (crash)', 2008 is inspired by an accident I had, when I scraped a guardrail at 200km/h on the motorway to Hamburg. The work took nearly a year to complete. I worked on it after work and on weekends."

What does it represent? The moment of your impact?

Eller: "Yes, but more generally it investigates how human perception works. We experience and get to know objects by moving around them, by over-layering moments of sense impressions, both visual and tactile."

ERICH WEISS IN BERLIN

In the gallery cluster at Kochstr. 60, Galerie Klara Wallner is showing new works by Erich Weiss. A series of film-stills on the wall investigates the visual language of one of Audrey Hepburn's most suspense-filled performances; her role as Susy in the 1967 film 'Wait Until Dark'. In it she plays a young blind woman, who through meticulous counting of her steps creates a mental map of the house in which she lives to find her way around. From the sound of footsteps and her references to the number of steps, Erich Weiss has drafted this mental map, effectively allowing the viewer to look inside the mind of Susy Hendrix. On the opposite wall, short pieces of text are framed and hung beside photographic images. The short texts are

reminiscent of haikus, but are none and the images make suggestive statements that are false. A woman's arm periodically stretches along a park bench. We only see part of her shoulder, her neck and her outstretched arm. Between her fingers she holds a plastic spoon that tries to be a smokeless cigarette. All the poetry is lost and we are left with the image of a melting spoon. Beside her the unforgettable eyes of Ines Sastre, the face of Lanoëme stare at the viewer. Weiss pretends her to be a vampire and the writing in the frame beside her image plays accomplice.

In Weiss' surreal world little is what it seems – everything is something else. As we step back to get an overall view of the series we step into the writing on



ERICH WEISS 'AS A VAMPIRE PREYING ON EYES', 2009, LIGHT RESISTANT INKJET PRINTS, DIFTON EACH 30 X 40CM, 200

the floor. It reads: "All Tomorrow's Parties" and is made of glitter dust. Just then the friendly gallerist hands me an invitation to the after-show

party somewhere in East-Berlin. Spooky. The writing refers to the song by The Velvet Underground & Nico, the brain-child of Andy Warhol, whose

Interview with Thomas Eller, Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin

'I THINK BERLIN NEEDS MORE ACTION'

Nameless doorbells often bear surprises. A man wearing a suit-jacket and jeans opens the heavy door while mumbling something into his iPhone. This is Thomas Eller, who in 2004, at the youthful age of forty, was asked to position the online magazine 'artnet' on the German art scene. 'artnet' is now firmly established and Eller, taking on a new challenge, has accepted the position of artistic director of the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. But Eller himself is also an artist. His spacious, well-organised studio includes a library and a small exhibition space – just in case a potential buyer decides to pay an unexpected visit.

David Ulrichs

In moments of extreme stress, our sense perception is heightened...

Eller: "As my car scraped along the guardrail, my gaze clearly focused on a little twig. It seemed to stand still, while the rest of my field of vision was a blur. It somehow gave me stability. In order to capture this moment in a work, I decided to let the viewer become the twig. Before this work, she becomes the non-moving object – the rest is a blur."

So how did your collaboration with the Kunsthalle begin? Were you unhappy at artnet?

Eller: "I am satisfied with what I had accomplished at artnet Germany. I had positioned the German magazine and re-organized the operations of artnet Germany. I set up a sales team within the Chinese art market and initiated a partnership with Art Basel. It all started last April. Gérard Goodrow had just left the Art Cologne; the board was looking for a successor and invited me to an interview. I accepted the invitation, but finally realized I was not the right person for the job. At the same time the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin was being realized and as editor-in-chief of artnet, I was watching the events unfold with a critical eye. One thing led to another and I became the artistic director..."

In your professional life you seem restless...

Eller: "Not restless, just curious! I had a great time at artnet, but I felt that after five years I had reached a level that would permit me to expand my horizon. Early in my artistic career, I saw myself as a man of potentialities. My work at artnet or the Kunsthalle is an opportunity to influence the way we relate to reality via art."

So five years at artnet and now one and a half years at the Kunsthalle? What next?

Eller: "Well, actually I am hoping to stay 5-10 years at the Kunsthalle."

But the Kunsthalle will be demolished in 18 months, or are there other plans? It does look rather provisional.

Eller: "Architecturally it is a temporary structure, but the idea behind it is flexible, rather than short-term. I cannot imagine that the team will just disintegrate afterwards, but who knows..."

I imagine that your job description at the Kunsthalle is quite different from what you were dealing with at artnet.

Eller: "Yes. With artnet, when I was not in the office in Berlin, I spent a lot of time in New York and Asia. I had very good relations with national and international commercial galleries. Now I also travel a lot, but much more within Berlin, visiting studios, institutions and making new contacts across the city. Since Berlin is one of the biggest production sites of contemporary art, I have to focus a lot of my attention locally."

So you were not hired to internationalize the Kunsthalle?

Eller: "That's an interesting question. When I was living in New York for almost eight years it seemed that the city was an abbreviation of the whole art world. Everybody inevitably showed up there at one point. Now, Berlin has this quality: Berlin = international. My job at Kunsthalle is to make this tangible."

What attracted you to the Kunsthalle?

Eller: "It is a great project, in a great city. I see Berlin very similar to New York of the 1960s. With the Kunsthalle, we want to redefine Berlin – at least within the art scene. At first it was meant to give the city a space to show the artists that live in Berlin. While there may be a shortage of art spaces, the Kunsthalle should not simply be a large exhibition space: like in New York or London, there will never be enough museums for all artists living in Berlin. Like the city itself, the Kunsthalle is a place of exchange of ideas, visions and creativity. It already functions like a giant transformer: artists come to Berlin for inspiration, to make works or simply because other artists live here. Some stay a few years, some only a few nights."

...for artists the opinions of other artists is always very important;

sometimes even more important than the opinion of the gallerist or collector. Some artists pushed their gallery to move to Berlin because here they feel among their peers.

Eller: "It is part of my mission to make Berlin as a place of interchange more visible. While it is necessary for Berlin to promote itself a lot more than it does, it needs to remain aware of the fact that it is not the only centre in the art world. Berlin needs to achieve the delicate balance between healthy self-centredness and cosmopolitanism! It is my role to stimulate a lively discourse on this topic."

But does Berlin really need another place for conferences, talks, lectures and meetings? Is it necessary to add another venue to the already impossible list?

Eller: "Well, I think Berlin needs more action, but it needs to be reflected action. In fact, I really want to get back to the origin of the Kunsthalle as a place where unexpected exhibitions can take place, with a political aftertaste."

So you want to evoke a kind of grand narrative with big ideas, didn't meta-narratives disappear during postmodernism?

Eller: "There used to be many different narratives that dominated discussions relating to art in the past. But now the entire art scene has differentiated itself a lot: every artist has his niche, and every niche has its market. There used to be a real fight for certain ideologies. Now everyone has become disinterested, with everyone doing their own thing."

I agree. Artists today very seldom argue about ideas, they argue about what group they belong, into which niche they fit, but not about what it all means. Still, I think it would be misleading to start a search for a definition of art.

Eller: "I'm not interested in anything normative, but I want to heat up the discussion – to openly discuss the epistemological of the contemporary art scene."

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