

MARTIN HONERT

OUT OF THE DEADPAN

JOSÉ LEBRERO STALS

Certain artists, when they set about creating a work of art, destroy or at least dispose of the first attempt if it fails to turn out according to plan. Others — the minority of artists — spend a long time thinking about how it might turn out and only when they are sure that they have a precise idea of what they are aiming at are they capable of giving material form to their idea.

A great deal of time is dedicated to each piece until every element involved fits into place. The end result is not always satisfactory, but it must at least approximate the image the artist originally had. There is no going back. Martin Honert has yet to feel one hundred percent certain, although he is genuinely convinced that he would defend any work in his catalogue despite the fact that nothing ever manages to do full justice to every aspect of the all-round, referential images that he originally has in mind. For this we should be grateful as soon as an artist believes he has fully achieved his target he ceases to be an artist.

"I try to achieve the highest degree of perfection in reaching the image I have but nothing ever comes out as it should," says the artist¹. What motivates this artist are his aspirations to the ideal or, rather, the formation of existence as a naked idea or concept as opposed to reality; a state of being in objective existence. Yet, if by this we mean an attempt to get behind something, even if the process may end up interrupted, then the artist should, without too many serious difficulties, survive the failure.

"It is not that I want to speculate on misfortune, but I know that however well things start out they need not necessarily turn out the way I want them to. This is what happened when I made *Tree* (1992). I said to myself, 'Try and reproduce what you have in your imagination as precisely as possible, right down to the last detail, but, Martin, do not forget that nothing is going to work.' The work of art always results as a stylization or a simplification and that is the only thing you can count on."

The spectre of failure is ever present when there is this urgent need to pin something down which you can only see, the mental image before it is something

tangible. "That was not the case with *Fire* (1992), which worked right from the outset. The creation process was problem-free. First I made the model in plaster and then the negative, although at that point I still did not know what color I would paint it. With this definitive — although unpainted — form, I continued to have faith in its working out." The happiness apparent in *Fire* seems to deprive sorrow of its place.

From the very beginning, Martin Honert knew that he did not want to treat fire as a destructive element but as the site and the meeting place for popular culture rather than culture in the mythical sense. As any country-dweller is well aware, when autumn arrives a fire is made. "I admit there is something very ritualistic about making a fire but it is also true that the process is linked to a very pragmatic conception of life. In spring, the garbage is disposed of and burnt. The functional goes hand in hand with the ritual. This is what I was after and I accentuated it through the dimension of the work." The resulting piece was a huge fire with very high flames.

In visual experience, objectivization is pushed to a greater extent than in tactile experience and, consequently, we might flatter ourselves into thinking that it is we who constitute the world because visual experience presents us with a spectacle, albeit from a distance, and gives us the illusion that we are immediately present everywhere and situated nowhere.

— Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 365.

The raw materials for these works apparently come from the most commonplace sources. Honert avoids touching upon "significant" themes and in no way evokes the figure of the artist angling at art criticism and muttering about being "interested in themes of death" or "the loss of truth from egocentric, auratic structures."

"I prefer those themes characterized by their absolutely reductive intention and total clarity. These are considerations of primordial importance and allow the work to stand up; otherwise it would fall.

Although he does not necessarily fit into this context, On Kawara is a good example. This is an artist who addresses time with great metaphysical clout despite the fact that, formally, he is simple and elemental and his work functions perfectly. The great risk involved in dealing with 'themes' is that there be a lack of simplicity which threatens to turn the work of art into something kitsch and unrefined. I am not uninterested in kitsch, but the unrefined, excuse me, is something hideous and it would be absurd to aspire to it. It is not even funny; it is pitiful. My interest in everyday concerns and triviality is due to my predilection for realistic representation. Simplicity and mundanity is what is closest to us. The various motifs of my work are culled from my own life and the way I perceive the world in my endeavor to examine it. This was the case with *Table with Trembling Pudding*. I put a lot of thought into it. The table is made in the same way as any other table. Since I was the one who was going to make the piece, I was convinced that it should be illuminated in some mysterious way in order to differentiate it from other tables. It had to be just so because I was creating it according to very special, personal conditions. The external aspect of the work was in no way different from any other table, but considering the work I had in mind, there had to be something like an aura (*smiles*), a light, a glow."

The dimensions of the table are themselves peculiar: not quite big enough for two people but large enough for one — dimensions which were dependent on the pudding which marked the origin of the piece. The idea relates back to the years Honert spent at boarding school, good times and bad for the artist, which thwart any interpretation of the piece as an instance of the artist's personal revenge. Honert had abandoned psychological art as well as the excessive presence of personal concerns in his work, gradually tending toward "interiors" in the faith that this would afford a greater opportunity for a more profound representation of the tensions, the memories, the smells, and the tastes he set out to give form to.

Children's Crusade (1988) is an

Johnen Galerie

FLASH ART

Martin Honert. Out of the deadpan

Apr 1993

allusion to a childhood image that Honert recalls from history class. In a lesson about the crusades, the teacher told his students at the end of the lesson, that there had also been a children's crusade which it was best not to dwell upon since it had come to a gruesome end. This was enough to arouse the artist's curiosity. Later, at the Academy of Fine Arts, Honert was reminded of children's plastic figurines and set out to create a work using them. At a certain point, both ideas — the children's crusade and the toys — came together. "The result was an authentic reconstruction of the times I spent playing and recreating scenarios. It took me almost three years to create them. Something kept coming back into my head and it had to be investigated because, as an adult, I was concerned with an image not from a book but which was a product of my imagination." The teacher's commentary had engendered in the artist the vivid image of a landscape, a scene in which he could see a group of children-crusaders accompanied by a team of professionals, not armed with toy weapons. "They were saying to me, 'Martin, come with us!'"

Was Honert turning childhood into something heroic by attempting to fasten down an image and give it permanence? Is this how heroes and myths are created? "It was important for me to capture this image. For one thing, I recalled my anguish as a child when adults refused to take me seriously and would say, 'Go and play outside.' I am sure that the games we used to play were not mere pastimes but very serious and we practiced them with the perfection of professionals. I think that finding out that those children took part in the crusades as soldiers helped me realize that my games were intended so seriously.

"To define the characterization of the figures, I chose to align myself with the typical way in which crusades are viewed. This work served to appease my abiding concern for childhood. *The Altar Boys* (1989) are formally similar to the *Children's Crusade*. The faces are painted so as to simulate the color of flesh; they are like puppets. This interpretation leads to some confusion as far as appreciation of the content is concerned. It has been said that the figurines appear to be blind, when what actually happened is that I refrained from painting in their eyes to accentuate that they were artificial figures.

"I once saw a film about Himalayan civilizations. They showed a Tibetan monastery where the high priest was a child of about six — he was the reincarnation of a religious leader. It was quite jolting to see him accepting this position at the very center of the service with such gravity and dignity, the concentration on his face as the monks

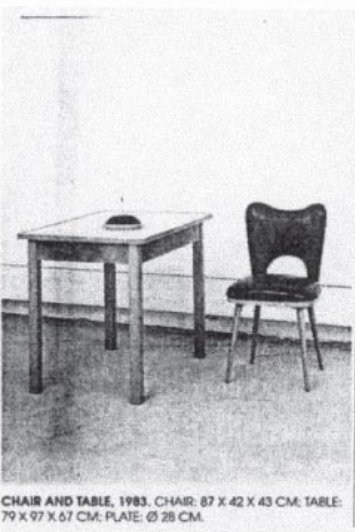


STARLING, 1992.
PAINTED POLYESTER, 195 X 171 X 16 CM.

brought him various delicacies and knelt before him like altar boys."

Honert was reminded of his experience as an altar boy, the pride and the sense of honor as he carried out a task that seemed so important to him then. "We felt like professionals on a stage."

Thus, Honert's interest in *The Children's Crusade* work was aroused. He perceived of them as being like common kitsch religious statuettes. Honert's altar boys — their clothes, their posture, their attitude — conjur up the idea of a religious trinket but they are not sacred. They are just normal, latter-day boys, a fact proven by the shoes and trousers



CHAIR AND TABLE, 1983. CHAIR, 87 X 42 X 43 CM; TABLE, 79 X 97 X 67 CM; PLATE, Ø 28 CM.

visible from under their habits. "I was intrigued by this mixture of religious article and profane reality and the opportunity to transmit this feeling of professionalism I wanted to confer upon them. Every Sunday, they carry out the mission that has been assigned to them perfectly." In *Children's Crusade*, on the other hand, what attracts the artist is the way in which a child can be put to use in what is a purely adult activity.

Let us consider any given form of sensory perception, that of a tree, for instance. Many philosophers state that we must make a distinction between man's perception of the tree and the tree itself or the tree 'in itself.'

— Erwin Schrödinger. *Meine Weltansicht, Mein Leben*, 1985.

The Tree (1990) is an expression of considerable anger. It took close to a year to complete and proved to be an unerringly horrific experience; every time I went back to the studio it was an enormous effort to get on with the work. Sometimes I would spy a piece of the work that had come out well and say to myself, 'If only the whole work could come out like that,' even if, in truth, all I could see was this monstrosity, a mixture of poisonous products harmful to one's health.

"My original idea was very romantic but when I got down to work, it began to turn into a monster to such an extent that whenever I got back from my daily struggle in the studio, I could make out, among the branches of a colored sketch I kept at home, the face of a monster watching me.

"Is the intention of a solution not to ensure the positive continuation of the being?"

— Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le pur et l'impur*, p. 67.

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(Translated from Spanish by a Christopher Martin)

Note

1. All quotes from an interview by the author, March 1993.

Martin Honert was born in 1953 in Bottrop.

Selected solo shows: 1988: Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne; 1990: Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne; 1991: Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich.

Selected group shows: 1988: Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich (with Elke Denda); 1989: Fondation De Appel, Amsterdam (with Katharina Fritsch and Thomas Ruff); 1990: "Carnet de Voyages," Fondation Cartier, Jouy-en-Josas (Paris); 1991: Bonner Kunstverein (with Pia Stadtbäumer), Bonn; "Anni '90," Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna/Cattolica/Rimini; 1992: Biennale of Sydney, Sydney; "Post Human," FAE, Pully/Lausanne (traveled); "Qui, quoi, ou?" Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; 1993: Aperto '93, Venice Biennale.