

twelve

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**performing | WUK
arts**

The Cabinet of Exhaustive Exhaustion.

Otmar Wagner

THE SEA

We wanted to see the sea.

So in August 2020 – the situation with regard to the Corona pandemic having eased over the summer – we decided to extend a visit to my mother-in-law in Milan by travelling to Trieste for four days. Immediately upon arrival my son and I leapt into the sea where, in snorkelling, we came upon an amazingly beautiful giant mussel shell. We dried it off and took it home.

CABINET

... a left-over word from “Cabinet of Curiosities.” Closely related also to “Cabinet of Wonders.” Denotes a secluded consulting or work-room – the side room. The Cabinet is a cabinet of art, a “wing”, a place of refuge and one of relevant decision-making, both political and artistic.

EXHAUSTIVE EXHAUSTION

I draw continuously from the fount of my Cabinet of Wonders – exhaustively, I draw upon my boxes, my thoughts, my experiences, my resistance, my pleas, my opinions, my doubts, not only from one project application to the next, but also within each project, or in odd jobs, and above all in my everyday life. In other words at all times and in all places. I am simultaneously Creator, Exhauster and Exhausted, a secular Trinity.

My aesthetic perception of an “art of the performative” is also measured by the way in which the relationship between “creation” and “exhaustion” is put mutually into play, and thus thematised, perhaps even exorcised or executed.



CREATION

God awakens Adam. Top effort, totally brilliant! (Michelangelo, Ceiling fresco, Sistine Chapel, Detail)

Photo by Otmar Wagner, 2019



EXHAUSTION

Forced to rely on his own resources, our meritocratic male subject awakens himself anew, day after day. Totally tedious!

Photo by Irene Cotichio, 2019

ENVIRONMENT/ EXHIBITION

In contrast to my other recent projects, it is not a case this time of me using thematic propositions as the starting point for my artistic work. The artistic/aesthetic approach of this work is from first principles oriented not in the direction of THEMES, but of the universe of its accompanying MATERIALS, collected, archived and consequently available to me, the “bricoleur.”

I aim to design a cabinet, a landscape, an island from all this stuff, this “pointless plunder” (*George Christoph Lichtenberg on the Cabinet of Wonders*), that is from all the materials which have accumulated in the course of my everyday artistic practice, that surround me, surface in memory, challenge me, and to which I am forever resorting/have resorted in order to make possible an often seemingly impossible continuation of my work.

Not only does this environment of Things, of gadgetry and objects inhabit the performance which will take place within it, but I also conceive of the performative activities/actions which I will generate in and with the material as a part of this universe, this articulated “Cabinet of Wonders” of my artistic thought.

At the centre of the (exhibition) space stands a shelving unit which stores the performative potential: some 80 white-painted banana crates, numerous smaller crates with knick-knacks, aluminium cases with special technical equipment, meaning cameras, video mixing desks, special effects devices, pyrotechnics, Midi samplers/switches/piezoes, the whole topped off with crates containing record-players, a boom box, a whole host of curious cartographies, a head-mounted disco ball, custom harnesses, electric drills, hammer drills, soldering irons, shrink hoses. Miniature models, kinetic gadgets, exhibits – all will become part of the exhibition. There will be a fitness lounge, a miniature theme park, mind maps.

PERFORMANCE

I shall be elaborating/distilling my performative actions/interventions as a part of the total environment, and on the basis of all the materials “available to me.” The approach to the work is intended to be coloured less by conceptual propositions and more by intuitive operations and decision-making processes. The method, as referenced here, will be more like that of a “bricoleur” than that of an “engineer.” In my understanding that also, in the ideal case, differentiates “art” from the “culture industry.”

This does not mean that the “bricoleur” (the English translation “hobbyist” doesn’t really nail it) leaves everything, by contrast with the “engineer”, to chance or even is incapable of planning. Rather, the process of planning plays out completely differently with the aid of everything that has been accumulated in one’s thoughts, one’s body and in the workshop “because it might come in handy one day.” All those content-rich themes and aesthetic materials “available to me”, which have accumulated in just the same way as the physical material, I shall also be deploying in any way I can use them /in any way that seems meaningful to me – everything in other words that I typically in any case deal with repeatedly. That includes surgery on the body of Europe, on the social bodies of nationalism and right-wing radicalism, ageing, space for life as opposed to Lebensraum, the construction of identities, those twins capitalism and depression, the quest for the right life in the wrong one, essayistic digression, territories

which must be sung about, dilettante songs, delirious diary entries, body art.

QUOTES

“Cabinets of Wonders arose from the relationship of humankind to rooms and to things. Places of collection for the most disparate things, they are not in fact the fore-runners of museums, but miniaturised representations of the entire macro-universe, and hence accessible models of a three-dimensional world of imagination.” (*Gabriele Bessler: The Discovery of Space in the Cabinet of Wonders. A World Model from the 16th Century. Published in: Wunderkammern. werk, bauen + wohnen, No 12 (2012), p12*)

“The historical Cabinet of Wonders has the same relationship to my cabinet of wonders as sculpture does to ‘living sculpture’, dominion over Things leads to participation in Things, the room installation becomes room fluctuation.” (*Otmar Wagner, 2019*)

“On the basis of the socialisation that is specific to Cabinets of Art and Wonder of natural forms, works of art and engineering, which visually at least offers a point for natural history to flow into human creativity, it appears this approach to collecting was not so much dedicated to the separation of diverse domains, but built on the capacity of the spectator for associative synopsis of objects of the most diverse nature.” (*Stephan Malaka: “Actualisation of Alchemy in the Works of Joseph Beuys – the Beuys Block as Manifestation of a World View Informed by Occultism, unpublished dissertation, Braunschweig, 2008, p 113*)

“The arrayal of genera serves not to separate the different domains, but to build visual bridges, allowing the associative capacity of the eyes to align itself with Nature’s capacity for play. (...) The collection becomes a gigantic vessel for a Nature which conceives of humankind and its works not as an exception but rather as a component of a greater whole.” (*Horst Bredekamp: The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine. Berlin 1993, pp 71-73*)

CABINETS OF WO(U)NDERS

Cabinets of Wonders fascinate us today as pre-scientific and abstruse relics of a bygone era: assemblies of part-exotic, part-scurilous objects, the product of the collecting passions of aristocratic

explorers, frequently without thematic focus, hodge-podges, cabinets of the heterogeneous and the sensational, cabinets of amusements. While the curiosities and exoticisms of the world were collected up in classical Cabinets of Wonders, in the colonialist disposition of dominion, it is me, myself, spawn of post-colonialism, that I place on display in my own Cabinet of Wonders, along with all the things which surround me, which I've collected both as refuse and equally as promise.

Historical Cabinets of Wonders bear witness to the total colonialist plundering of the world. They are a panopticon of sovereign power over the world, whose pinnacle is the monstrous horror of the display of human bodies, like that of Angelo Soliman or Sawtche, alias Saartjie Baartman, taxidermied, or dissected into individual pieces for exhibition, the sinister outlines of the cruelest hegemony.

My artistic Cabinet of Wonders bears witness to total artistic self-plunder, as the basis and product of the capitalist plundering on the world.

On show is an artistic outline of impotence, of my power and powerlessness as profiteer and precarious person, simultaneous perpetrator and victim of the system.

Against the ideology of "pioneering" art, that is of an art of the "avant garde", which since the start of the 20th century has been nothing more than the expression – put on show – of a capitalist "promise of the future" configured in ever-more warlike fashion (*"... nowadays, when we reflect nowadays on what it actually is that binds the individual to society, we hit in my opinion on the concept of the Career. We create careers, good or bad, upwards or downwards, stagnant, hasty, quicker than others, and careers are always such that what we have achieved is valued in relation to what we might do with it..."* (Niklas Luhmann in a lecture on societal norms)), I propose an ideology of art as "a room for reflection", an art without promises, a performative present which is formed in the "here and now" out of an engagement with the past.

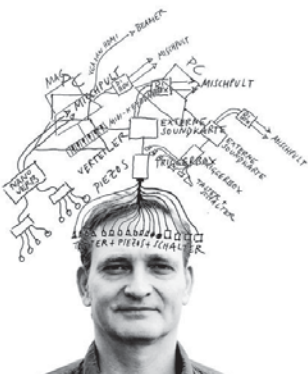
FORM AND CONTENT

While entire organisations devoted to consciousness formation (eg Harald Welzer's "Futur Zwei!", or the Hamburg Institute for

Social Research, numerous “Alternative Investor Institutes”, and protest platforms like #aufstehn.at) position themselves as alternatives, whole hosts of Key Account, Supply Chain, Business Development and Content Managers, not to mention System Administrators, are busy promulgating the social Sound of the competitively oriented racetrack – and therewith the content of an apparently inevitable form of existence for society.

“Form can only be a form of its content”, Bertolt Brecht wrote, a long time ago, no doubt convinced that as an artist he might lay claim, rather like an engineer, to be the constructor of societal life configurations. Against the backdrop at the time of the appearance – from today’s perspective a rather treacherous one – of a worker class which less than two decades later was to merge in somnambulist utopias with an imagined intellectual class, and was meanwhile reformulated as the gloating, veiled trauma of the 1968 generation.

“Form has outgrown me,” is what I say, whereby I mean, sticking with Brecht, that my command of content has slipped away, and my private “Content Management System” has collapsed. Wherefore I sit whispering melancholically to the ether, and quoting Gottfried Benn: “So many forms I have walked through/Through Me and Us and You/All of it though was painful, sore/And that question again: “what for?”



My midi-driven sound system is outgrowing me and produces white noise.

Desire, odd jobs, Slavoj Zizek, family, climate protection, garbage sorting, fifty+, shopping, death is a dandy, grant application prose, parents' evening



My everyday life, my age, and my grant application prose are all outgrowing me. As is everything else.



My EXISTENCE is outgrowing me and is generating a halo (*Project outline “SHIMMER”, 1990*).

ROAD SHOWS & ANTIQUES

It may be that the CABINET OF EXHAUSTION is something like the cultural antithesis to “Antiques Road Show.” This programme, so amazingly beloved of 10-12-year-old children and OAPs (who else should give out information about possible futures?), is founded on a respectful, tender engagement with Things/objects, with the aim of transforming their grandeur into value. In such a system, value can only be established as monetary value. Monetary value becomes the measure of Things. The value of each Thing is therefore measured in the final analysis, despite a foreground of immaterial estimation of value, less on the basis of fascination or love for the Thing, and rather on its monetary value. Monetary value / cash payment by the dealer is the dramaturgical plot and the climax of the programme.

In my Cabinet of Wonder, the value of Things/objects is not negotiated. They are what they are. Contextually, they become charged with meaning, or they fade away, depending on how they are read by the viewer. Things/objects live or die on the basis of viewing, they are displayed for the attention of viewers in quite rudimentary fashion. In this context there is no exchange value, and thus no way to “generate capital from them.” The capital involved in purposeless viewing is not measurable nor value-able, no more than the resulting (viewing) experience in certain circumstances.

FAN MUSSELS

So there lay this real life object in our house, this huge mussel shell .. and I embarked on research. I discovered we were dealing with the so-called “Fan Mussel” (*Pinna nobilis*), and that it has been illegal since 1994 to take them from the sea, even dead. When an Austrian holiday-maker attempted to take home nine Fan Mussels as a souvenir in August 2018, he was arrested at the Croatian border, was prosecuted and received a stiff fine. It thus became clear to me that we had acted not only thoughtlessly and irresponsible, but also against the law.

The Fan Mussel, I learned, was displayed in many Cabinets of Wonders in the late Renaissance and the Baroque era, and its filament beard, which the mussel uses to anchor itself to the sea bed,

was extremely precious – the “mussel silk” made from it was used to manufacture textile objects (for example gauntlets or gloves). These natural produce artefacts also found their way into Cabinets of Wonders. There is probably only one mussel silk spinning mill left in the world, operated by one Chiara Vigo in Sardinia. In the course of my researches I also stumbled across a very fine essay by Berit Glanz, published in *Kursbuch* 202 in June 2020, and entitled “Where is the Fan Mussel?”

GUESTS

As things current stand Berit Glanz will be reading from her essay “Where is the Fan Mussel?” and Lars Moritz will be devoting a lecture-performance to our live with and among Things. Among other things he will deal with the question of whether sardine tins can really see. Further guests are also planned.

POSTSCRIPT

The project was postponed by one year to January 2022 because of the Corona pandemic. Between the development of the concept and its actualisation (which remains uncertain even now, depending on the evolution of the pandemic) there have meanwhile now been two and a half years. With all the re-planning and reinvention that has ensued during this time, the work on the project has now itself developed into a PROCESS OF EXHAUSTION – quite a fun outcome.

The performance artist **Otmar Wagner** and his work have been repeated guests of the WUK performing arts programme since 2017. The formats he creates are as diverse as his creative output and his artistic vehicles, which range from essay performances through concert performance to performative installations. You can catch up with him and his latest work on show at the Kunsthalle Exnergasse for the first time.