Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



Attitude as antidote

Sylvain Menétrey

The group exhibition *No Dandy, No Fun*, a fascinating enquiry into dandyism in art, was meant to be thegrand finale of the Kunsthalle Bern’s recent sequence of shows featuring dandy artists such as Michael Krebber and Marc Camille Chaimowicz. In opposition to essentialist conceptions of identity, the dandy is presented as a counter-model who makes his life his work of art in an act of simultaneous exuberant self-affirmation and fantasized self-effacement. For this inclusive re-reading, the curators Hans-Christian Dany and Valérie Knoll have endowed the dandy, who above all embodies an attitude, with augmented subversive powers.



I would have preferred not to talk about Michael Krebber. His evasive painting leaves me feeling like I've been ridiculized. His multiple refusals – of originality, signature, finality, etc. – make it impossible to locate him. The contrast between his display of detachment and his ambitious project, the renewal of painting itself, opens a chasm so wide that any attempt to bridge it with words is at your own peril.



Michael Krebber, *Untitled*, 2003, silhouette, acrylic on canvas, plexiglas. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/N

Michael Krebber's work is barely present in the *No Dandy, No Fun* exhibition at the Bern Kunsthalle, which devoted a major retrospective to him in 2017. Just a 2002 poster advertising a "second-hand seminar"' on the subject of dandyism at the Hamburg art school,

and a collage mounted on a white background, the badly-proportioned silhouette – a Manila paper cutout enhanced with casual brushstrokes – of a man wearing a top hat and leaning on a cane. The silhouette protrudes over the canvas, which in turn floats in an oversized fame. The controlled carelessness of this rendition and the figure of the generic dandy make this piece an emblematic concentration of what the show is all about. But beyond its material manifestations, Krebber's attitude – toward art and life – infuses the entire exhibition. This is especially because the co-curators, Valérie Knoll, director of the Bern Kunsthalle and the artist and curator Hans-Christian Dany, took *Ausserirdische Zwitterwesen* (Alien Hybrid Creatures) as their conceptual frame of reference. In this 2005 artist's book Krebber explains the utility of dandyism for artists and provides a list of recommended reading on this subject by the Situationist Oswald Wiener.

This exhibition clearly argues that the artistic significance of the figure of the dandy lies in its antagonistic relationship with the notion of fixed identity. It makes this case from two angles, identity as staged and identity as erasure. These two modes converge in a rejection of innate identity that instead sees identity as a construct. In today's cultural context where identities are reified, that stance amounts to a political manifesto. Krebber himself embodies the two facets of the manufacture of identity. He's seen as a Cologne legend, a painting teacher whose methods are unconventional, a master of the paradox and preemptory judgment. At the same time, his work, which he sometimes describes as the product of a "painting machine" whose programming is still in the beta stage, affects a total lack of sensibility.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Monsieur Teste*, 1974, 35mm film (digitalized), 2:08 min. Courtesy the Estate Marcel Broodthaers, Brussels. Pho

Krebber often cites Monsieur Teste, a sort of dandy in disguise who hates the extraordinary, an "impossible" character, according to his creator, the writer Paul Valéry, because he is pure consciousness. This exhibition presents Marcel Broodthaers' sarcastic take. The Belgian artist's 35mm short film shows a balding bourgeois dummy mechanically nodding his head as he reads the newspaper L'Express. In Valéry's novel, the narrator says he never raises so much as a finger because he has "killed his inner marionette." For Broodthaers, in this way Monsieur Tete has killed his own humanity as well, falling into the same stupid robotic state he thought he was escaping. A painting by the fictional artist Reena Spaulings updates, for today's era of artificial intelligence, the idiotic dialectic hiding behind the concept of sovereign intelligence. The act of painting was delegated to a robot vacuum cleaner that, like a snail, left behind a trail as it scuttled across the canvas. The visible and laughable traces of its comings and goings bear witness to the absurdity of the movements of a robot held in a cage. Dandies are often described as artists with no artwork; the opposite proves to be equally

possible.


Dunham

Miriam Laura Leonardi, *Pair of Shoes (Unisex, Euro Size 38)*, 2017, leather, wood, thread, gold foil stamping. Private Collection, Ge

Further along in this show, a silkscreen by Sturtevant reenacts the famous photo of Joseph Beuys wearing his signature hat and a fisherman's vest, marching for the revolution *(La Rivoluzione siamo Noi)*. As in her other work, this piece seeks to demolish the idea of originality and adds a bit of gender trouble as well: a woman's body inhabits this self-portrait of a male artist whose public persona and personal mythology are indissociable from his production.



Exhibition view, *No Dandy, No Fun*, Kunsthalle Bern, 2020 Photo: David Aebi

The curators suggest that despite the usual masculine designation, the dandy attitude is transhistoric, transgender, transclass and transrace. A room near the entrance, decked out like a curiosity cabinet with its vitrine aesthetics and all sorts of objects ranging from literature to fashion, alerts visitors to these transferences and intertextualities. We are also given Virginia

Woolf’s essay about Beau Brummell, the original dandy, a man with neither fortune nor title who raised “the art of knotting his tie to perfection.” Because of her lifestyle, Woolf[1] herself is sometimes considered a dandy. This introductory room references the Black dandy tradition, to which a part of the basement is dedicated, starting in the eighteenth century with Julius Soubise, a Black enslaved child from the Caribbean bought by a Royal Navy captain and subsequently given to the Duchess of Queensberry. Finding him charming, she had him baptized, freed and educated. Although Soubise’s elegance made him popular in British high society, eventually he was driven into exile in India by accusations of rape. Dandies often end up badly. Sophisticated dressing as a vector of Black pride was to persist in jazz history and reemerge among the hip-hop aristocracy, reaching a high point with the snazzy Congolese “sapeurs” who adore suits from the Comme des Garçons fashion house. The show examines this community of elegance through a series of photos by Victoire Douniama showing a group of bowtie-wearing women (“sapeuses”) in Kinshasa.



Exhibition view, *No Dandy, No Fun*, Kunsthalle Bern, 2020 Photo: Stefan Burger

The strength of *No Dandy, No Fun* comes from its preference for found treasures and original adaptations over the obvious and the branded – an expression of dandy distinction – and its

continual intercutting of such references. David Hammons's blue-colored film glued to the windows not only plunges the stairway leading to the basement into an artificial, fin-de-siècle atmosphere reminiscent of Joris-Karl Huysmans's decadent aesthete character Des Esseintes in his novel *Against Nature*, they also trace the link between the figure of the Black dandy and the artistic establishment, all the while upholding anti-originality, since the curators rest content with recycling films from Hammons' 1997 solo show at the Kunsthalle. The refinement of these semiotic dispositions is echoed in a room dedicated to the theme of (dangerous) games, with, among other pieces, John Kelsey's watercolors of men fighting in the streets, Guy Debord's *A Game of War* and a video of the 1990s post-Situationist band KLF burning a million pounds sterling in royalties. This interplay between anti-bourgeoisie subversion and direct action reflects a core dimension of the dandy attitude, a readiness to risk everything with no regard for scandal or collateral victims.



Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 1999, feltpen, acrylic paint, aquarell, pencil, wax on paper. Courtesy Alexander Schröder Collection Photo: Dav

This show melds the pleasure of the senses – the gilding of the walls of a room with a reflective film in Lutz Bacher's *It's Golden*, for example, and, to mention one of my favorites, two paired small paintings by Kai Althoff presenting Brueghel-esque drunks wearing elegant peasant clothing in an embrace that is half-languid, half aggressive – with the pleasure of reason, the pleasure of curiosity and the pleasure of play. This inclusive reconsideration of the figure of the dandy proves to be a tremendously powerful curatorial apparatus. It's the fruit of painstaking thought and research so that each selected piece of the puzzle is never what would seem to fit naturally, while at the same time the choices never seem trivial or forced. These departures from the traditional (white male) narrative take the risk of obliterating the political

ambiguity of dandyism as evidenced, for instance, by Barbey d'Aurevilly, who defended monarchism, or the 1960s London Mods whose misogyny didn't stop them from borrowing their girlfriends' clothes. The exhibition ends with Heiji Shin's enormous photo portrait of Kanye West that intelligently dialecticalizes this problematic by showing a megalomaniac African-American musician who has opted to side with today's reactionary power structure.

Despite being swallowed up by a horrible year that ended with long waiting lines at soup kitchens, Covid-19 testing centers and the Louis Vuitton boutique on the Bahnhofstrasse, and forced by the pandemic to close six days after its opening, nevertheless this exhibition amounted to a dazzling beam of light shining through the reigning nihilism – an antidote to depression. It offered a broad-spectrum antibiotic to cure our conditioning by synthesizing and reactualizing 300 years of the subversion of social norms by people who make their lives a work of art. It remains to be seen whether this remedial deconstruction of identities can intersect with the righteous demand for more representation of minorities in today's cultural institutions.[2] But isn't that just like a dandy, like Krebber's contingent brushstrokes, to pose nothing but a possibility?

[1] This show uses Virginia Woolf's essay instead of the male author Barbey d'Aurevilly's well-known biography of Beau Brummell.
[2] See my text An Error of Identification, a discussion of exhibitions calling for a fluid understanding of identity held at hitherto not-very-inclusive institutions.

SYLVAIN MENÉTREY

Sylvain Menétrey is an independent writer, publisher and curator. He co-founded the art and photography periodical Dorade (2009-2013), worked at Fri Art, Fribourg's Art centre (2013-2016), and co-directed the Art space Forde in Geneva (2016-2018). He also is the editor of Issue-journal.ch [http://issue-journal.ch/] and a teacher in Visual Arts at HEAD – Genève.

Sylvain Menétrey ist freier Autor, Verleger und Kurator. Er war Mitbegründer der Kunst- und Fotografiezeitschrift Dorade (2009-2013), arbeitete bei Fri Art (2013-2016), und war Co-Direktor des Kunstraums Forde in Genf (2016-2018). Er ist auch Herausgeber von Issue-journal.ch und Dozent für Bildende Kunst an der HEAD - Genève.