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The master and the masquerade

Geraldine Tedder

Accept Baby is the second part of an exhibition series at Forde in Geneva taking on the relationship between art and desire, focusing especially on the artist as creative persona. Subjectivity, authenticity, interiority—the themes approached are vast, their preconceptions embedded in the legacy of modern art discourse. The causality that prevailed between artwork as expression of subjectivity, a causality rigidified in the writing of art history, seems to be toyed with in these works.


ACCEPT
BABY



Accept Baby, Exhibition view, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde

Play is everywhere in *Accept Baby*, beginning with the exhibition architecture: Forde's large space is split into several smaller rooms, a sequence defined. The rooms have been given names such as «Le Salon» or «Musée d'art moderne», walls painted deep shades of red, green, and yellow. The lights give off a warm glow rather than the familiar cool glare. The exhibition space is inverted, the off-space masquerades as an outdated version of the nineteenth century museum, complete with cabinet and decorative colored walls evoking a bourgeois interior. In the «Réception», the piece opening the show is also the one that inspired its title: Hans-Jörg Mayer's painting *Accept Baby* (1983) hangs high, ranked as a kind of token. Annina Matter and Urs Zahn's *Portrait of a Narrative* (2017), a schematic grid in different colors, is a finger-painting following a strict set of rules the artists set themselves. A boy and a girl play dress-up and perform as entertainers in a post-apocalyptic setting in the film/video work *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (1984). There is the shaking mannequin *Jeudi* (2017) by Coline Mir, a disturbing, yet beguiling Doppelganger, a doll referencing surrealism and the movement's interest in the distorted body. In the next, much more intimate room, the «Cabinet», there is a desk, its drawer open, by Tristan Lavoyer, a portrait of painter Frantisek Kupka by Jean-Baptiste Bouvet as well as the work *Whenever I Feel Afraid, I Whistle a Happy Tune* by Steve Bishop; text excerpts on how to make your home an ideal space for creativity. «Brun: Inquiétude. Avec le rose; tendresse» reads a painting by Andreas Hochuli; semantic play, the words toying with their form. Here the works point to the figure of the writer and of the grand painter and allude to creative personality as genius. Then there is Camille Alena's *Fortnum and Mason*, a musical box sculpture made up of tea and biscuit tins decorated with merry-go-round imagery, playing a song in reverse. In the three-part *Portrait* (2016) by Lulou Margarine a girl looks out, she's sucking something. It's a tease, a challenge to what you see, an image of desire—one moment child attachment, the next one of lust. The drawings are set in frames too large, the glass of one broken. There's also a large cinnamon spiral work by Margarine, giving off a sweet scent fitting to the overall tone of the show, a sensualized version of Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty*. In the last room, the

«Salon», the works take up symbols of a bourgeois lifestyle. Take Cédric Eisenring's two paneled pieces *Industrial Dreamer 1&2*: The works depict costumed figures, clad in tailcoats and top hats, in a distorted, topsy-turvy world. They seem to fall out of time, apparently unfazed by contemporary aesthetic. Then there is Daphne Ahlers' *Fotzen, Fotzen, Fotzen – irgendwo ist St. Pölten*: Two pretty ladies' hats on fine stands, whose intricate decorations on closer inspection turn out to be contraceptive coils and pearl sex toys. And bejeweled necklaces by Gabi Dziuba and Hans-Jörg Mayer, exhibited in vitrines, enhanced as fetishes, the words «Accept» and «Baby Baby» again a riddle, referring back to Mayer's painting on the other side of the wall.



Accept Baby, book selection, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde



Annina Matter / Urs Zahn, *Portrait of a Narrative*, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde

For each show, Forde uploads material on to a google drive folder that can be accessed via their website and links to questions and themes approached in the respective exhibition. By doing this, the production process of the exhibition is opened up beyond a pre-post logic, creating a framework in which to possibly think about the works in the respective shows. This logic also applies to this text: From the get-go, I was in conversation with the current curators, Nicolas Brulhart and Sylvain Menétrey, and had the pleasure of closely following and exchanging thoughts on the show. This collaboration was manifested in a presentation of books and magazines. Rather than introducing the kind of informative or factual material

usually found in display cases, we aimed at ‹setting the mood›, assembling covers as images and using titles for their tone, so as to evoke certain themes recurring throughout the show. Continuing the dialog after the show had ended, I went back to one of the texts included in the *Accept Baby* folder: Craig Owens' 1983 essay «Honor, Power and the Love of Women». [1] Why this text? Activating a historical text such as Owens' for a contemporary art show seemed to me to be posing the same question the works in the show were: How to take up historical forms and utilize them for the present, and how to turn such a re-reading of ‹classics› into a tool for an altogether more political agenda.



Accept Baby, Exhibition view, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde

The main aim of Owens' text is to send up the neo-expressionists (or, in Owens' terms, the «pseudo-expressionists») as «[…]the wholesale liquidation of the entire modernist legacy». The arguments as well as the methodology Owens applies to execute his fierce critique are an interesting entry point into *Accept Baby*: The text is a historically specific critique of Owens' contemporaries, a critique constructed around what is often perceived as the bedrock ergo a-historical Freudian notion of the artist as master. Owens criticizes the neo-expressionists because, in his view, they confirm Freud's speculation on the artist as being the emblematic figure of the hero, able to mold his phantasies into a new kind of reality through the process of sublimation. Charged with the aura of historicity, yet completely denying that history, the neo-expressionists create what Owens terms «artificial masterpieces»; they aim at mocking modernist ambitions of progress by means of style (Owens names spontaneity and immediacy) and unveil them as constructs. Caught in a double-bind due to the expectation of transgression, Owens observes the artist resorting to irony: «[…]it seems to me that contemporary artists simulate schizophrenia as a mimetic defense against increasingly contradictory demands—on the one hand, to be as innovative and original as possible and, on the other, to conform to established norms and conventions.» The aspiration to mastery still persists, and it is achieved by way of a pastiche of historical forms: The work «speaks in the present as if it had been made in the past», quasi a quick fix to satisfaction. It is, of course, no

coincidence that the artists Owens discusses are all men. Freud clearly attributes the desire of mastery to man, and Owens sees this same desire to achieve «honor, power and the love of women» still persisting. Yet, in comparison to the modern understanding of the self, Owens defines the subject as being in crisis, split, schizophrenic in its postmodern shell. He ends his essay self-reflexively with the call to turn to and question the concept of mastery, fully acknowledging that he himself has succumbed to its appeal in writing his critique. In one fell swoop, Owens not only accuses the neo-expressionists of basically continuing in heterosexual male power play, but also reveals Freud's speculation on the role of the artist to be jaded. For Owens, the crisis he sees in art practice mirrors a moment of theoretical collapse, and vice-versa; strategies fitted to the psychic structure—fears and desires—of the heterosexual male just won't cut it any longer.



Andreas Hochuli, *Tendresse*, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde

Owens' text as a framework is interesting when thinking about the subjectivities at play in the works in *Accept Baby*. Though in different ways, all are somehow opposed both to the romantic idea of artistic expression coming from some kind of true, stable, autonomous, a-historicalcore—now a fiction of modernity—and to the subsequent postmodern notion that saw a crisis of the author. Whereas avant-garde strategies are perceived as an enigma, postmodernism's absolute break with these was maybe too emptying. The works in the show seem to be fueled by an altogether different desire. The sweetness that many of these works emanate is seductive, a pleasing aesthetic. The works are comforting, charming; they approach personal intimate themes such as sexuality, love, the home, having a child, being a child—stories of origin and feelings. These are interests echoing modernist fictions, those of subjectivity, authenticity or interiority, for example. In this respect, the strategies could be compared to Owens' description of the neo-expressionists: The interiority is stylized; the illusion of a direct transferal of libidinal energies diverted into cultural form is constructed. Yet the question is: To what end this play with forms, narratives and roles? The idea of play is interesting here as a strategy, and it comes close to performativity. Roles, positions are

strategically acted out, in full awareness that the self is not simple, but still there is a subject to be transmitted. The works do not disregard complex subjectivities and the possibility that an interiority expressed as a subject can exist in parallel to the author self.

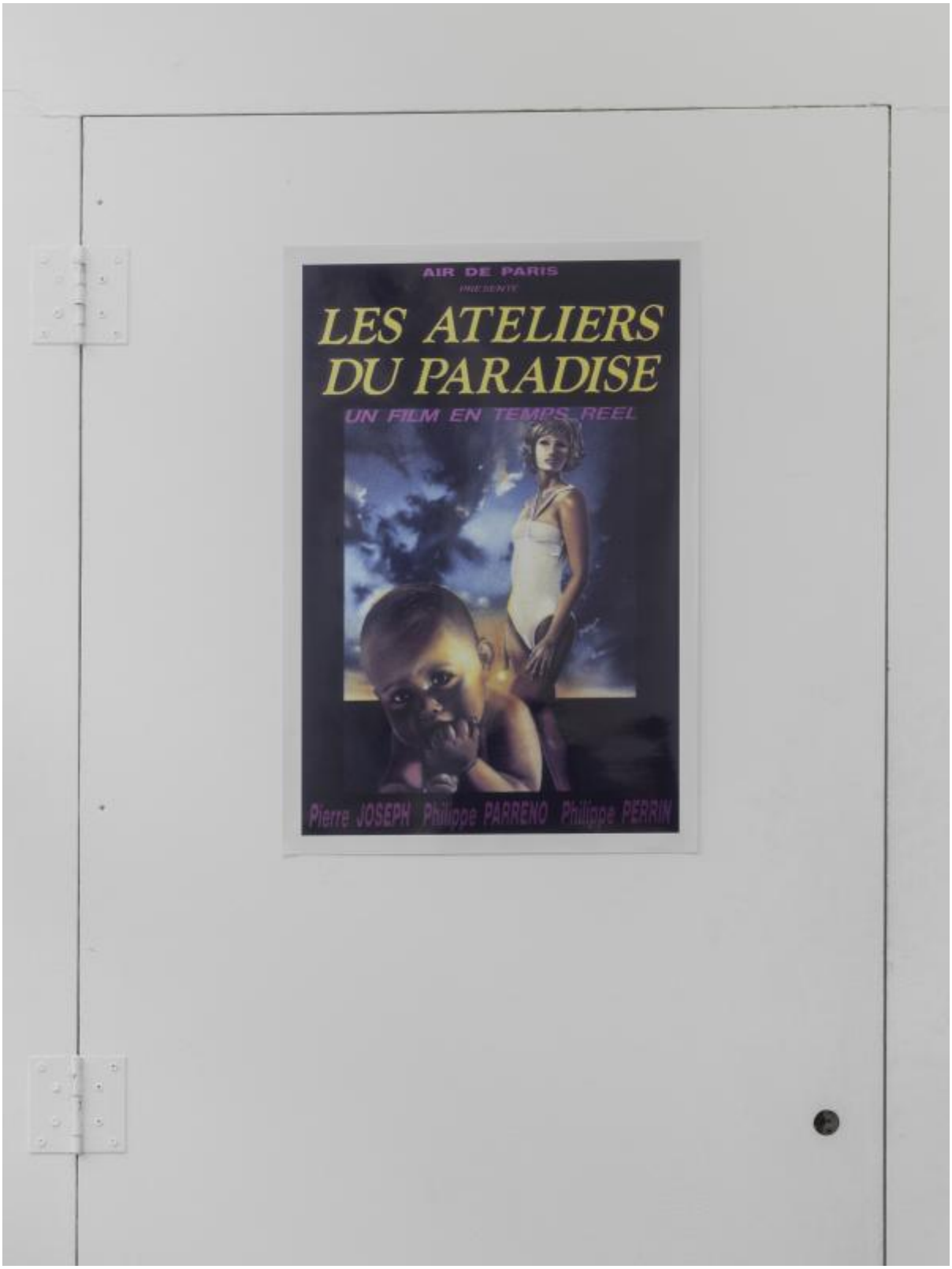


Lulou Margarine, Installation view, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde

Acted out—and this, of course, is the switchpoint—they do not confirm the modern subject and, with it, the psychic structure of the heterosexual male, but challenge this structure and re-read it. The identities are fluid and ambiguous. Everything is performed, queered; even the exhibition display is inverted. The self, then, can be staged, constructed, or fragmented, can be hidden and façade and changing. The invention of a subject links to ideas on the figure of the dandy, to the strategy of posing or masquerade; a form of mimicry entailing a splitting of a subject, a body detaching itself from itself, becoming a picture, a semblance. These are strategies that have been tied to issues of gender—masquerade or posing in feminist psychoanalytic discourse has been seen as a possibility for empowerment in the scopic regime, in creating a distance to the image, so as to be able to manipulate it. The self is posed for the sake of expression, the subject makes itself seen, «poses as an object in order to be a subject.»[2]



Accept Baby, Exhibition view, 2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde



Bernard Joisten, *Les Ateliers du Paradise*, 1990/2017. Photo: Julien Gremaud, © Forde

Accept Baby was on show until January this year. The first part of the series, *The Eternal Return of the Real*, took place in the fall of 2016, and the third part is to end the tenure of Nicolas Brulhart and Sylvain Menétrey at Forde this summer. The thoughts I have presented

here on a posing of subjectivities could also be applied to the first show. Yet the forms these subjectivities take on vary greatly. In *Accept Baby*, the roles acted out have a certain demeanor and the works are, as stated, charming, comforting. In The Eternal Return of the Real,the aesthetic of the works was more morbid, themes of excess, trauma, violence, or paranoia approached. Rather than speak of an illusion of a direct transferal of libidinal energies diverted into cultural form, the works stage disruptive forces, the extreme, a psychic glitch. The third exhibition will, I hear, focus on the tension between the drives and the mind. Together, the exhibitions attempt a loose psychoanalytical reading of certain tendencies in contemporary art. A reading that, as always, brings with it more questions. Is this construction of subjectivities a symptom ofa culture where the self is perceived as ever being absorbed? Is it strategic individuality in times of collective individualism, maybe even exploiting the idea that we are all (exhausted) output of our interiority? That by doing it yourself and ever transforming, you're trying to gain control of the story being told about you anyway.

[1] Craig Owens, «Honor, Power and the Love of Women», in Craig Owens, Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture, edited by Scott Bryson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 143–155.

[2] Craig Owens, «Posing», in Owens, Beyond Recognition, pp. 201–217. See also Mary Ann Doane, «Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator», in Screen, 23, 3–4 (1982), pp. 74–88. And two contemporary exhibition press texts: one by Stefanie Kleefeld for Halle für Kunst Lüneburg for the exhibitions Fantasie (Imagination); Gebärde und Ausdruck (Gestures and Expression); Authentizität Das Authentisch Unauthentische (Authenticity. The Authentic Inauthentic)and the other by Penny Florence for Lucy Stein's exhibition Knockers at Galerie Gregor Staiger.

GERALDINE TEDDER
Geraldine Tedder is a curator and writer. Most recently, she co-organised the event series *On Reception* at Fri Art, worked on an exhibition at Shoefrog in Vienna with Lorenza Longhi and Francesco Cagnin, and collaborated on the audiobook *Notes on Furniture* with Chantal Kaufmann. From 2013-2019 she was assistant curator at Kunsthalle Bern.

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