

An Aside: Selected by Tacita Dean. Camden Arts Centre, 18 February -- 1 May 2005

An Aside. Selected by Tacita Dean, by *Tacita Dean*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, London, 2005, 80pp., 80 colour illus., £12.95, ISBN 1 85332 247 4

In the final room of *An Aside* Lothar Baumgarten's feathered bread rolls scattered on the windowsills were poised to fly, as their title *Mosquitos in Kopula* (1969) suggests, like insects around the other exhibits. Unconstrained by the doughiness of their bodies they conveyed the apparent lightness of curatorial touch that was present throughout the entire exhibition. Indeed, the lack of any additional literature on my visit (barring the catalogue itself) that might be read in conjunction with the objects of the display bore witness not only to the success of the show but to the ease with which it might be traversed. Devoid of accompanying notes, or 'informative' panels of text, spectators could meander throughout the Camden Arts Centre weaving their own connections between, and frameworks around, the objects of the exhibit. Conversely, the accompanying catalogue provided a compelling narrative of chance and missed encounters that encompassed and exceeded the boundaries of the physical exhibition.

Surrealist at a distance

In the catalogue Dean writes of her dilettante approach to the surrealist thesis of objective chance -- the genesis of her serendipitous curatorial methodology is exemplified in the retelling of her encounter with another of Lothar Baumgarten's works included in the exhibition, *Da gefällt's mir besser als in Wesfalen, El Dorado [There I like it better than in Westphalia, El Dorado]*, (1968-76) [Fig. 1]. This slide and audio show of ambiguous images mixes man-made and natural objects, producing involuntary sculptures of found materials from the Rhine river swamps that fascinate and disconcert simultaneously. On meeting Dean, Baumgarten recounted an anecdote of seeing a dog in this swamp that he subsequently discovered belonged to Gerhard Richter. Furthermore he recognised resonances between the other artist's work and his own, pointing in particular to a self-portrait by Richter that appeared to Dean as 'effaced, or lost, beneath a deep dark forest undergrowth.'¹ This web of connections fortuitously encompasses many of the themes of the exhibition -- self-portrait, landscape, object and journey -- in addition to providing the accidental process (which led to the inclusion of another of Richter's works) that gave Dean the form of the exhibition, one of connections, encounters and coincidences, an organic development of content and context.





Figure 1: Lothar Baumgarten, *Da gefällt's mir besser als in Westfalen, El Dorado, [There I like it better than in Westphalia, El Dorado]* 1968 –1976, projection with sound © the artist 2004, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

To describe this as a process of objective chance is to take this surrealist concept at face value. André Breton retrospectively described objective chance as 'the geometric locus of ... coincidences,' and posited it as the problem of how 'phenomena that the human mind perceives as belonging to separate causal series come so close together that they actually merge into one another' producing a glow 'so bright, albeit so ephemeral.'² Dean's reading of the subject is right to emphasise the pragmatic nature of her relationship to this thesis. The processes of chance that contributed to the curatorial decisions do not produce bright glows of light, sparks derived from the decontextualised juxtapositions of works. In fact, these processes almost operate in opposition to this marvellous effect as the works derive meanings directly from both their original contexts and nudging up against each other. They are instead definitely 'asides': that technique of turning from the fictive illusion of the stage to the audience to impart information not previously visible, but present and essential to the plot.

Ritualised practice

Dean's inclusion in the catalogue of a description of Baumgarten's temporally drawn-out process of collecting his images from the banks of the Rhine also draws attention to another of the exhibition's themes; that of repetition and ritual in the construction of the artwork. Baumgarten's slide images were collected over a period of years during early morning walks. In a more controlled and precise methodology the montaged images of Yvan Salomone's watercolours of the empty industrial spaces of container ports, which took over an entire wall



of the show, were made within the strict confines of a self-imposed regime [Fig. 2]. He painted one a week taken from his own photographs, each work the same format and size (104 x 145 cm) and devoid of human figure or movement.³ This emphasis on process was visible too in the inclusion of Roni Horn's work, the double self-portrait *Were 4* (2002). Here one could almost see the painstaking progression of the work with its successive stages of the application of pigment to paper, the cutting of the paper into geometric shapes and the joining of the edges of paper together, defined further by the use of pencil markings and producing a result almost topographical in its detailed appearance. In Sharon Lockhart's film *NŌ* (2003) we were further presented with compulsive process as a male and female farmer raked up twelve piles of straw and then began the procedure of undoing their work as they reintegrated the piles back into the landscape. This piece, possibly the weakest of the show, acted most successfully as a space from which one could be prodded gently on some of the motifs that had now established themselves in the form of landscape, circularity and repetition. However, these returns spoke less of compulsion and more of circularity, laying bare the labyrinthine connections between the works.



Figure 2: Yvan Salomone, *3.0604*, 2004, watercolour on paper, 104 x 145 cm. Courtesy Praz-Delavallade, Paris and Baronian-Francey, Brussels © Yvan Salomone, 2004

Object and landscape

Interspersed with this emphasis on process was the more evident relationship between object and landscape. The scale of Yvan Salomone's watercolours of industrial spaces placed in



relation to Paul Nash's exquisite but tiny black and white photographs of natural subjects threw into high relief the presence of the artist at the work. Just as Salomone cannot contemplate painting an image that he has not experienced personally, Nash's images appear as 'found' in the landscape and connected to the pair of painted stones by Kurt Schwitters as a sympathetic manipulation of still life. In another room (the one populated by copulating mosquitoes) Thomas Scheibitz's over-sized decorative, wrapping-paper *Star* (2002) [Fig. 3] responded to Fischli and Weiss's rubber facsimile of a Moroccan pouf, *Marokanis Sitzkissen* (1987), drawing attention to geometric pattern and innate compositional structures.



Figure 3: Thomas Scheibitz, *Star*, 2002, brass, 83 x 83 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Produzentengalerie, Hamburg. Private collection.

This play of object and intervention found its apotheosis in the most outstanding piece of the show, the transfixing film by Rodney Graham of a pristine 1930s German typewriter, slowly being covered by a layer of snow/flour, *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8*, (2003). Part film and part meditation on medium, it was necessarily afforded its own large space in order to accommodate the outmoded projector which formed not just the apparatus of the work but a constituent aspect of its subject. The visibility of this huge machine, its movement and its integral noise, emphasised the mechanical nature of the subject, the physicality of the machine required to project it and, by extension, explicitly pointed to its complement, the



natural fall of snow and the reliance on the somatic affect of the persistence of vision to complete the experience.

Self-portrait

The other obvious constituent to the exhibition was the inclusion of self-portraiture from the aforementioned work of Horn to the delicately androgynous sculpture by Beuys. The additional heads that populated the exhibition in the form of the companion bust of Beuys by Walter Brūx and the *Deux Têtes* (1983) of Marisa Merz reinforced the doubling of imagery and idea within the exhibition and the persistent interplay between representation or recognition of the self and the other. That is to say, the whole exhibition could be read as self-portrait or at least an autobiographical retelling of a journey of discovery undertaken by Dean herself. The connections between the works and her own are explicitly drawn in the catalogue. Take for example the collective contribution of Horn, Raymond Hains (whose ravaged poster work hangs adjacent to Horn's piece), Peter Fischli and David Weiss who all reference Jules Verne, whether through, respectively, other works, anecdote, or the kinetic sculpture *Son et Lumière, Le Rayon Vert*, 1991. The latter is a deceptively simple sculpture consisting of a revolving turntable which tilts a plastic cup causing it to roll in a repeated pattern while a flashlight projects a green or red ray through it and against the wall. In referencing Verne's book *The Green Ray* as mediated through Eric Rohmer's film of the same name, the work draws attention to issues of light, horizon and journey. These themes are all too familiar from Dean's own film and flick book *The Green Ray* and surface in many of her other pieces.⁴

Indeed, with Breton's *Nadja* cited in the reading list that accompanied the notes for the exhibition it is perhaps useful to think of the show not simply as a narrative of fortuitous encounter or eagerly willed chance occurrence (Breton's search for the presence of *BOIS-CHARBONS* comes to mind). Instead it is perhaps *Nadja's* and the catalogue's parallel autobiographical narratives that reveal the surrealist import of the exhibition, as exemplified in Vincent Kaufman's recognition that 'Its [Surrealism's] kernel is an autobiographical project'.⁵ As Dean herself points out in her introduction 'I have begun to recognise myself: *my* human psyche, not so much in the work of others -- although I have always believed that art works best when it responds to the autobiography of the viewer -- but in the connections between them.'⁶ This is an exhibition where the trace of the artist/curator is insistently present in these connections but where there is also an excess of space for the viewer to insert themselves and their own stories.

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¹ Tacita Dean, *An Aside*, London 2005, 12.



² André Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, New York 1993, 107.

³ See Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, *Place*, London 2005, 166.

⁴ In particular I am thinking of her series of works *Disappearance at Sea*, which were inspired by the story of Donald Crowhurst who faked accounts of his around-the-world sailing attempt. For example, the film *Disappearance at Sea* (1996) charts nightfall as seen from a lighthouse, alternating between the view towards the horizon and the play of light caused by the bulbs themselves.

⁵ Vincent Kaufman, 'Life by the Letter,' trans. Caren Litherland, *October* 64 (Spring 1993), 99. An additional account of the importance of the surrealist 'autobiographical narrative generated by the condemnation of the novel,' is proposed in Dennis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates. Shadows Don't Cast Shadows,' *October* 69 (Summer 1994), 124.

⁶ Tacita Dean, *An Aside*, 4-5.

