

# Alexandre Singh

Revue de presse  
Press review



Prix Meurice

POUR L'ART CONTEMPORAIN

10 ANS DE SOUTIEN À LA CRÉATION ARTISTIQUE



# 2012 | 2013

PRIX MEURICE - 5<sup>E</sup> ÉDITION

## *The Humans*

Un théâtre où  
se conjuguent les excès

Le projet proposé en 2012 par Alexandre Singh au jury du prix Meurice et qui lui valut de le remporter cette année-là s'est concrétisé avec une ampleur inédite puisqu'il n'a pas donné lieu seulement à une exposition au Witte de With, pointu centre d'art de Rotterdam, mais aussi à une représentation théâtrale dans le cadre du Festival d'Avignon en 2014, et auparavant à la Brooklyn Academy of Music. Et on en passe... Le talent d'Alexandre Singh pour faire voyager sa pièce n'a d'égal que l'ambition démesurée du projet et la complexité de son intrigue. Sur scène, une myriade de personnages portant masques et toges (ce qui situe l'action dans une époque indéterminée, mais quelque part entre l'Antiquité grecque et le xv<sup>e</sup> siècle italien de la commedia dell'arte) devisent sur la création du monde et plus précisément sur la création des êtres humains. Impossible de raconter, même sommairement, le dédale de leurs réflexions. Toutefois, des lignes de force apparaissent nettement dans cette œuvre. Singh l'avouait dans un entretien publié en 2014 sur le site du Festival : « Il s'agit de jouer sur les oppositions masculin/féminin, rationnel/irrationnel, connaissance/folie, pour faire naître une forme inattendue. » Ce qui trouble davantage encore, c'est la pléthore de références, de citations et d'emprunts dont l'énumération (pour autant incomplète) suffit à donner le vertige : « Commedia dell'arte, Woody Allen, théâtre grec, Molière, Mozart, Shakespeare, kabuki, etc. Ce spectacle est un peu comme un gâteau préparé avec tout ce que j'adore. Il est aussi intrinsèquement lié aux inspirations de la pièce, telles que le théâtre d'Aristophane qui est un art du trop : trop de blagues – souvent très vulgaires – trop de masques, trop de danse, trop de chants. J'aime passionnément ce théâtre fantasmagorique et excessif. » Enfin, il faut souligner l'habile complémentarité que Singh a su nouer entre son travail de plasticien et son rôle d'auteur de théâtre : les décors, les objets, les accessoires passant allègrement de la scène aux salles d'exposition, où ils prennent valeur d'œuvres à part entière. **Judicaël Lavrador**



*The Humans*

Septembre 2013,  
représentation théâtrale,  
Rotterdamse Schouwburg,  
Rotterdam



### Alexandre Singh

Né en 1980 à Bordeaux, Alexandre Singh développe un travail érudit, nourri de références disparates puisées tant dans la culture populaire (la publicité ou les soap operas) que dans une bibliographie savante du théâtre classique (Aristophane et Molière). Mais, ce que cet artiste précoce, dont les toutes premières expositions remontent à 2001, fait de ce savoir encyclopédique n'a rien d'académique et relève plutôt de l'acrobatie spéculative et du plaisir de jouer avec les limites de la fiction et du réel. Ses œuvres prirent ainsi la forme de diagrammes et de cartes mentales,

d'enquêtes et de conversations. *Assembly Instructions: The Pledge*, en 2012, déroulait ainsi la biographie de Simon Fujiwara, artiste versé dans l'anthropologie et l'observation des grands phénomènes sociaux. Artiste surtout dont l'existence, réelle ou imaginaire, reste une énigme.

### Galerie Art: Concept

Créée en 1992, par Olivier Antoine, à Nice, à l'ombre de l'école de la Villa Arson peuplée d'une nouvelle génération d'artistes (dont Michel Blazy, resté fidèle à la galerie) et de son dynamique centre d'art, Art: Concept déménage à Paris, rue Louise-Weiss, à la fin des années 1990 avant de se recentrer dans le Marais il y a cinq ans. Mais la ligne reste la même. Que ce soit en peinture (avec Francis Baudevin ou Jean-Luc Blanc), en sculpture (avec Hubert Duprat), en photographie (avec Pierre-Olivier Arnaud), en vidéo (avec Ulla von Brandeburg), les œuvres que l'on découvre à la galerie relèvent toujours d'une réflexion approfondie sur la forme et sur le médium lui-même, qu'il s'agit de mettre à l'épreuve et d'en reculer les limites traditionnelles.

[www.galerieartconcept.com](http://www.galerieartconcept.com)



Alexandre Singh *The Humans*

Sprüth Magers, London 24 January – 29 March

It all sounds like so much *fun*. A reworking of ancient Greek comedies, with sculptor Charles Ray epitomised as a Prospero-like figure 'seeking', as he says, 'pure form in geometry' on an island supposedly run by a deity who communicates through an air conditioner and a Nespresso machine. His demigod offspring try to disrupt celestial machinations, only to bring about the calamitous creation of humanity itself. Alexandre Singh's three-hour play *The Humans* (2013; video 2014) has singing, dancing, Existentialism and toilet humour, and oodles of nods to *The Tempest* (1610–11), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1590–96), *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *Dumbo* (1941). But as Singh has said himself, 'I often prefer reading plays to seeing them.' Contemporary comedic musical dealing with theological and philosophical issues it is. *The Book of Mormon* (2011) it is not.

Singh's ambitious theatrical debut is a verbose mashup of origin stories and theosophy, about the struggles between rational, Apollonian traits and wild, Dionysian emotions. Desire is the engine that moves the plot, whether in the suppressed tryst that produced the demigod protagonists Tophole and Pantalingua, Tophole's unwittingly incestuous love for Pantalingua or the humans' own

unleashed anarchic cravings. But tellingly, those desires are always offstage, mediated only by language; even *N*, the silent rabbit embodiment of earthly, bodily fecundity, can only be understood through translation by her daughter Pantalingua, a hyper-intellectual Victorian dandy. Singh seems to take his commitment to the dramatic genre very seriously, filling his play with familiar stock characters, whether plucked from Shakespeare or *The Office*; Tophole seemed written for Martin Freeman or Richard Ayoade, and the human Prime Minister is, inexplicably, an overweight Scouser.

With its constant musings about determinism, of course we know what's going to happen: the statues made by Ray will become humans, their transformation marked by donning Greek drama and *commedia dell'arte*-inspired grotesque masks; the humans will make their own pathetic pantheon from the comedy of errors we've witnessed. Singh's version of dramatic irony, though, isn't so much to lead us on a cathartic journey through a well-told tale. It seems more to want constantly to point to its overstuffed trunk of references to Nietzsche, Leibniz, Hegel, Kant and on and on. For a newly written parable about the search for

meaning in life, what Singh mostly seems to be saying is that contemporary culture hasn't added anything particularly insightful to the debate; it's just good for a few quick butt-in jokes.

Singh took pains to emphasise the theatricality of this work; that despite it being shown only within the framework of the Witte de With in Rotterdam and Performa 13 in New York, it is meant not as a visual artist's project, but as musical theatre in itself. The video documentation of the performance is accomplished but loses some of the allure that (I'd imagine) the live performances held; instead we end up focusing on the microphone scratching and sometimes incomprehensibly muffled voices of the humans behind their masks. Despite that, and surprisingly, this exhibition does the project a favour. Rather than just the 'sellable bits' from the stage, the drawings, props, sculptures and character portraits shown here at least give the ideas more room to breathe, and allow the audience more of their own ways in than the hermetically sealed creation on stage. Perhaps, as in his earlier installations, Singh's strength lies more in the creative suggestion of intertwined, referential narratives than in their realisation.

Chris Fite-Wassilak



*The Humans*, 2013, theatrical performance. Photo: Sanne Peper.  
Choreography: Flora Sans. © the artist. Courtesy Sprüth Magers Berlin/London;  
Art: Concept, Paris; Metro Pictures, New York; Monitor, Rome

## Performance Art That Looks a Lot Like Theater

By ROBERTA SMITH and SIOBHAN BURKE  
Published: November 15, 2013

Alexandre Singh's "The Humans" has its ups and downs, but it is still one of the outstanding achievements of the Performa 13 performance art biennial. Commissioned in collaboration with the Witte de With Center for in the Netherlands, it is less performance art than classical theater with all the benefits of a highly skilled, well-rehearsed cast.



Richard Termine

The Humans at the Brooklyn Academy of Music is part of the Performa 13 festival.

Mr. Singh, a young British artist, is known for arcane installations, but here he embraces accessibility, carefully timed slapstick and amusing wordplay as he explores his talent as a writer-director. And he is certainly not afraid to appropriate.

Inspired by Aristophanes — whose "The Birds" its title echoes — the work melds numerous creation myths, starting out as Greek drama and seguing to commedia dell'arte and Mozartian opera, with a great deal of lubrication from Milton, Shakespeare, the Bible, Rabelais and Oscar Wilde. Mime and choreography (by Flora Sans) figure in, as well as a Greek chorus that turns increasingly musical. The composers working with Mr. Singh, the lyricist, are Gerry Arling, Rik Elstgeest and Bo Koek (in collaboration with Robbert Klein, Annelinde Buijjs and Amir Vahidi).

There is even a cat goddess (Simona Bitmaté), who speaks and meows with equal effectiveness, and a sculptural set, by Mr. Singh and Jessica Tankard, that adds its own sense of play.

"The Humans" is an extremely ambitious undertaking, built on the faith that older culture is always part of the new. It begins slowly, gains speed and vividness and then spins a bit out of control toward the end, at which point you begin to wish for a copy of the script, and lyrics, so you can keep up with the jokes and linguistic pyrotechnics.

The complicated plot centers on a godlike figure named Charles Ray (after the American sculptor, and played by Phillip Edgerley) who often speaks in rhyming couplets and is tasked with creating humans in an Edenic studio. His plans for maintaining the new species in a state of eternal,

if strictly dictated, reason (and also in togas), are wrecked by his apprentice and son, a fretful Woody-Allen type named Tophole (Sam Crane) conspiring with Tophole's love interest, the funny, wordy and Wildean Pantalingua (Elizabeth Cadwallader).

Inspired by N, Pantalingua's mother and an instinct-is-all rabbit queen (Ms. Sans), they set out to free the humans, or more accurately, facilitate their fall from grace. To their horror, they end up with an irrational, mercurial mob subject to all the imperfections of human nature — hunger, lust, greed, power and, worst of all, death. While this transpires, the costumes (by Holly Waddington) mutate into hilarious ensembles redolent of Breughel, Hogarth and Otto Dix that make much use of Cindy Shermanesque prosthetic body parts. In the end, everyone realizes that it is better to be than not to be.

## Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley: Alexandre Singh's *The Humans*

by William S. Smith



Alexandre Singh: *The Humans*, 2013. Photo  
Richard Termine.



In his solo performances, Alexandre Singh often assumes the persona of a slick motivational speaker. Using nothing more than an overhead projector and stacks of transparencies, he charts webs of connections between far-flung images and texts. Over the course of a lecture that meanders between authority and irony, or in one of his flowchart-like artworks, he might show how "Sex and the City" and "Grey's Anatomy" are predetermined by the work of Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde. Singh mines the deep structures of culture, those core narratives and beliefs that persist over time even as the surface features of art and literature change to satisfy fickle tastes. Still, his work seems to be less about establishing a theory of everything so much as reveling in the paradoxes, tangents and idiosyncrasies that spiral outward from the attempt to systematize something as unsystematic as human culture.

So it actually seems logical, even necessary, that Singh's practice would develop into a sprawling theatrical production. *The Humans*, with a cast of dozens, had its U.S. premiere at BAM's Fisher Theater as part of Performa (through Nov. 17), having been produced at Witte de With in Rotterdam in September.

*The Humans* teems with giddy ambition. Ostensibly about the creation of mankind, the part opera, part allegorical play is concerned with the basic infrastructure of human society: ethics, religion, science, philosophy, good and evil. This sounds like heady stuff, and it is, but Singh's production adheres to the Brechtian proposition that the first responsibility of theater is to entertain. So we witness what is essentially a narrative primer on Nietzsche punctuated by lively song-and-dance numbers and slapstick routines.

One imagines that the whole production began as a diagram. A core opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian is reflected in Singh's symmetrical set design. Verdant stage right is overseen by N (Flora Sans), a full-figured bunnylike creature who communicates in flamboyant body language and spends her days in a giant outhouse. Stage left is the staid realm of sculptor Charles Ray (Phillip Edgerley). He is the logician, the space-measurer, the creator of man. His ash-colored studio looks like a tidy version of Dürer's *Melancholia I*, filled with masonry tools, instruments of learning, and the requisite dodecahedron. From her outhouse throne, the bunny-woman produces great rivers of excrement; out of Ray's studio come statuesque human automatons who live only to toil and obey. A

towering mountain of fractured polygons divides the stage, ensuring that these two poles of existence remain forever separate.

From the beginning, though, the balance of this static dichotomy is thrown off and a narrative set in motion by the offspring of the bunny and the sculptor. The demigods Pantalingua and Tophole have inherited mixtures of their forbears' qualities. The beautiful Pantalingua (Elizabeth Cadwallader) is as articulate, rational and self-assured as Ray, but shares her mother's pugnacious streak. Tophole (Sam Crane) is the kind of authoritarian subject one finds in most Hugh Grant films: neurotic and lovesick but essentially obedient. Together they plot to subvert the divine plan of Voxday, the omnipotent force (possibility just a misunderstood cat) that has blessed the world with air conditioning, demands offerings of milk, and issues commands discernible in leftover espresso grounds.

All of this and more is explicated in the first 30 minutes of the three-hour performance, mostly in rapid-fire Oxbridge banter between Pantalingua and Tophole. At times one worries whether the vast scope established at the outset might devolve into a great mess in the hands of a first-time director with a well-used library card and lot on his mind. In a recent interview, Singh defended the conventional narrative structure of the work: "I challenge anyone to write an opera from scratch . . . it's just as difficult as making an avant-garde piece."

Yet what holds *The Humans* together is precisely that Singh didn't begin with an empty page. This tale of creation-of starting anew-is as familiar as they come, and Singh has filtered his script through a great cultural sieve. The anachronistic world created on stage leans heavily on Greek theater, the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton and Mozart. There are direct quotes from these sources, but mostly the script contains subtle echoes of familiar passages. These serve as reminders that while this territory is plotted out, the tale of creation is still the most compelling story we have. So we return again and again to freshen it up, to make it newly entertaining.

It helps that the performance is genuinely funny, and that the script's fluid transitions between vernacular speech and flights of Romantic poetry are performed by professional actors. Ray's cadre of humans-a Greek chorus and later a jazzed-up chorus line-sing wonderfully. (They are virtuosic, not just good relative to most "deskilled" performance art.)

The humans may be the supporting cast for most of the performance, but they are also the show's real protagonists. They are us, after all, as a few poignant fourth-wall-penetrating glares from the stage affirm. We cheer when the stiff plaster creatures with numbers for names revolt against their servile fates. The rupture occurs when the Dionysian and the Apollonian realms are joined in a profound scatological cataclysm-the high and low point of the production. The humans' bowels evacuated, they become craven, but essentially loveable, creatures pursuing newly discovered desires and intellectual faculties. Donning grotesque masks evocative of James Ensor or Otto Dix paintings, the humans fumble their way through the Enlightenment, goaded on by the tyrannical Vernon (Ryan Kiggell).

What follows is a tender vision of ugly, idiot humanity. The show's misanthropy is always upbeat, even-or especially-when we know we are implicated. If the initial diagram were to be redrawn over the long arc of *The Humans* it might show how the Apollonian and the Dionysian have been transformed, through the interventions of the demigods, random accidents and the missteps of humanity, into the new concepts of good and evil. Yes, this is an opera about the human condition, one that grapples with curse of being and the horror of nothingness. We might groan at that idea, though it should really be inspiring that one young artist has given himself license to take up these threads. By raising the issues he does, Singh affirms that they belong to a common cultural inheritance, not just an aristocratic tradition. *The Humans* doesn't offer new questions (much less answers) about life and philosophy, but it succeeds in underscoring how urgent the old ones remain.



**The Assembly Instructions** were developed as a sort of formal drawing in which I'm exploring ideas that are whimsical but around which I didn't necessarily want to create a gigantic all-consuming cosmological project. So they treated subjects like Ikea stores which are something that I had to visit to a lot. [There is] a piece in which Ikea is supposed to have been an index of all world human knowledge, encoded into these seemingly random arrangements of objects in the showroom. [Another] piece [collages] images of the protagonists of Grey's Anatomy and from Sex in the City with Lord Bryon and Alexander Pushkin, [creating a comparison between 19th century romanticism and 21st century TV sitcom, romantic heroines].



**Assembly Instructions (Ikea), 2008**



Alexandre Singh, *Assembly Instructions*, 2009  
White Columns, New-York © Alexandre Singh — D.R.

## ENTRETIEN — ALEXANDRE SINGH

Entretien February 13, 2013 — By Paloma Blanchet-Hidalgo

Exposé jusqu'en juillet à l'espace Rosenblum Collection, lauréat du Prix Meurice pour l'art contemporain 2012/2013, Alexandre Singh propose une archéologie de la psyché humaine. Partition de signes donnée comme un vaste conte ou un air de musique, l'écriture s'amuse des codes esthétiques. Entre poésie et digression : la rhapsodie.

**Paloma Blanchet-Hidalgo : Qu'il s'agisse de performance, de sculpture, de dessin ou de collage, l'invention narrative est pour vous essentielle.**

**Alexandre Singh :** J'aime raconter des histoires ! Tout objet suggère un usage, donc un contexte. Et la fable est en elle-même porteuse de personnages ou d'objets, de gestes ou d'actions, riche, en somme, d'une matière visuelle.

**Quels rapports l'écriture entretient-elle avec votre pratique ?**

*Crossing Mirrors*  
@ Rosenblum Collection  
& Friends from October 18, 2012 to July 18, 2013.  
[Learn more](#)

Elle s'impose de plus en plus comme matrice de mes projets. La narration est comme une toile d'araignée ; douée d'une logique propre, de règles internes et de jeux formels, elle capture et accumule dans son tissu imaginaire ces mouches en plastique que sont les objets. La présence du texte, imprimé dans un livret et associé à mes pièces, invite à une mise à distance par la diversité des langages adoptés. Ou peut-être est-ce l'inverse, la multiplicité des points de vue sur une même pièce la rendant en quelque sorte plus accessible...

**Un dispositif d'enchâssement structure votre roman *The Marque of the Third Stripe*. En quoi participe-t-il d'une démarche réflexive ?**

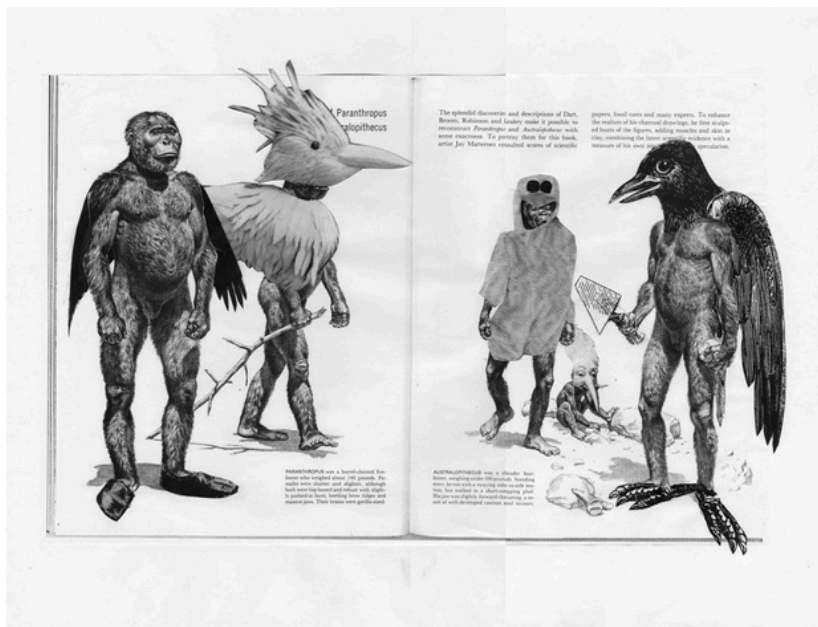
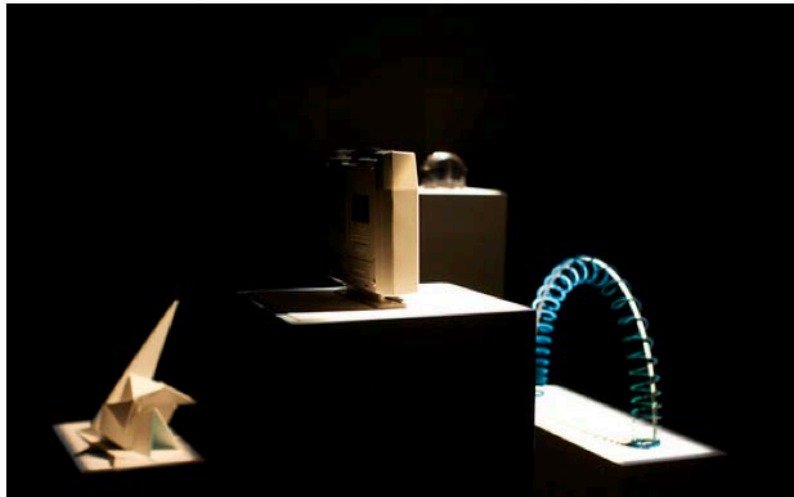
Cette dimension réflexive apparaît nettement dans la description d'environnements et d'objets semblables à ceux présentés dans l'espace d'exposition. Mais ce roman met aussi en scène « l'esprit maléfique du monde ». Il entre en contact avec des sportifs qui, représentés par des carrés noirs et blancs, surgissent directement dans l'esprit humain et apparaissent dans une vidéo qui reprend l'histoire. De plus, à chaque mot correspond un motif visuel et inversement. Le roman est donc entièrement construit selon une logique d'emboîtement, de mise en abîme. D'une manière générale, la dimension méta-textuelle me semble être au cœur de tout travail artistique. Car la création est un jeu ; et le jeu explique ses propres règles, tout en proposant le moyen de les contraindre.

**Au sujet de cette série, vous évoquez les « palais de mémoire », antique *ars memoriae*, ou art de la mémoire, fondé sur le souvenir de lieux existants. On pense aussi à *La Bibliothèque de Babel* de Borges (*Fictions*).**

Un ami écrivain, Vincenzo Latronico, suggère que tous les artistes tributaires de la pensée de Borges devraient lui verser une taxe ; je serais le premier à devoir le faire. Car, bien sûr, il y a des analogies entre ses *Fictions* et mes constructions mentales. Mais comment pourrais-je l'éviter ? Je lis, je rêve, j'aime aussi *Les Mille et Une Nuits* . Qu'y puis-je ?

**Vos pièces mettent-elles en évidence des codages symboliques ?**

Disons qu'elles articulent mes propres codages à des imaginaires pluriels, comme celui de la Kabbale. Ce système vénère la manifestation des dieux sous dix aspects, les *Sephiroth*, lesquels m'évoquent les dix joueurs d'une équipe de football. Il existe selon moi des relations formelles entre l'organisation des *Sephiroth* et les plans d'attaque du PSG. Peut-être existe-t-il aussi des relations conceptuelles. Je joue, j'invente pour m'amuser, tout en espérant amuser aussi le spectateur. Si je trouve quelque chose d'important en chemin, c'est un accident bienvenu. Mais ce n'est pas le but.



Alexandre Singh, *Assembly Instruction (The Pledge : Alfredo Arias)*, (détail)  
47 framed inkjet ultrachrome archival prints and dotted pencil lines — Dimensions variable, edition of 3+2ap  
Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Art:Concept, Paris

**Certaines de vos pièces manifestent le fantasme d'une connaissance universelle et absolue...**

C'est bien le cas de certaines *Assembly Instructions*, associations d'images qui se présentent comme des modes d'emploi ou des cartographies d'idées un peu puériles : *Manzoni*, *Klein*, *Colour Theory and Statuary* ou *Ikea* . Dans cette dernière, les collages forment le noyau d'une conférence imaginaire au cours de laquelle Ingvar Kamprad, fondateur d'Ikea, aurait eu l'idée de créer une chaîne de magasins contenant toute la connaissance de l'univers. Matelas, coussins et meubles divers véhiculeraient, dans leur agencement, un langage secret et codé. Un constat peut-être absurde, sans doute plein d' *hybris* .



Alexandre Singh, *On the Nose (Woody Allen)*, 2012  
Collage, watercolor, graphite inkjet ultrachrome print — 12 5/8 × 15 3/4 in  
Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Art:Concept, Paris

### **Quelle tension entre humour et gravité ?**

C'est un problème intéressant. Certaines œuvres trouvent un équilibre parfait entre ces deux forces. On peut citer *Don Giovanni* et *Le Nozze di Figaro*, presque tout Shakespeare, les pièces de Tom Stoppard ou les films de Woody Allen, *Annie Hall* et *Manhattan*. Voyons ensemble *Melinda and Melinda* et discutons-en après !

### **Vous affirmez votre intérêt pour les *Essais* de Montaigne. Un recours aux discours de l'altérité et une forme de « rhapsodie » lui permettaient de suivre l'évolution de sa pensée. Votre pratique est-elle aussi un lieu de d'observation, de bifurcations ?**

On a souvent rapproché mon travail de réseaux physiques et virtuels tels que l'Internet ou les structures arborescentes. Pourtant, mon projet n'est pas là. Une véritable histoire est moins rhizomatique que rhapsodique ; notre propre vie suit un chemin fait de nœuds et de digressions, à la manière de *Tristram Shandy* (Laurence Sterne). De Montaigne j'aime en effet la quête de compréhension, ainsi que la grande diversité des sujets qu'il se donne. On retrouve cette influence dans les *Assembly Instructions*. Accrochées aux murs et reliées par des points, elles tentent de formuler une idée concrète *via* un médium abstrait : le dessin. Du reste, les images elles-mêmes m'intéressent moins que les relations qu'elles entretiennent, au gré de lignes, de cercles ou de structures digressives. Autant de traits que l'on retrouve dans *La Critique de l'École des Objets*.

### **Il y a aussi, dans cette installation, quelque chose de la maïeutique socratique...**

Oui ! C'est selon moi une superbe technique pédagogique et dramatique. Il ne faut pas oublier que tout échange entre personnages relève de la dialectique. D'ailleurs, j'aime aussi les dialogues de Diderot, en particulier *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

### ***La Critique de l'École des Objets* semble faire le diagnostic d'une époque et d'un discours pédañt auquel elle n'adhère plus. L'œuvre a-t-elle pour vocation de questionner le statut d'un spectateur devenu lui aussi personnage ?**

D'une certaine façon, oui. Le spectateur est immergé dans le dispositif, en tant que sujet d'une conversation menée par des objets qu'il regarde sans cesse. Il prend alors conscience de lui-même. Les objets sont capricieux, idiots, hypocrites, imbus d'eux-mêmes ; leur comportement picaresque tourne en dérision, sur le terrain de la mondanité, le badinage propre aux gens de la société cultivée, comme vous et moi ! Je trouve par ailleurs touchant que, durant toute la scène, les personnages restent soumis aux mêmes forces, aux mêmes problèmes.

**Pouvez-vous évoquer *The Humans*, projet qui vous a valu le Prix Meurice 2012/2013 ?**

*The Humans* est une comédie que j'écris en ce moment et dont j'assurerai la mise en scène en automne 2013 au Schouwburg de Rotterdam, puis à la Brooklyn Academy of Music de New York. La pièce a comme point de départ les comédies d'Aristophane. L'histoire, fantasmagorique, repose sur les efforts de certains esprits pour empêcher la création du monde. Cette « cosmogonie » prendrait la forme d'un théâtre total incluant musique et danse, pour exprimer, avec humour absurde et légèreté, la dualité nietzschéenne du dionysiaque et de l'apollinien.



*Assembly Instruction (The Pledge : Alfredo Arias), (détail), 2011*  
Courtesy de l'artiste et galerie Art:Concept, Paris

## Alexandre Singh

01.16.13



View of "Alexandre Singh - Assembly Instructions: The Pledge," Galerie Art: Concept, Paris, 2011.

*Alexandre Singh is an artist and writer based in New York. For "The Pledge," Singh has photocopied hundreds of drawings and found images, framing and connecting each across the gallery with lines of hand-drawn pencil dots. The exhibition is based on a series of interviews Singh conducted with scientists, artists, writers, curators, and filmmakers in 2011, each of which is included in Palais de Tokyo's Palais Magazine #14, as part of a special issue created by Singh. "The Pledge" opens January 17, 2013, at the Drawing Center in New York and runs through March 13. It is Singh's first solo museum exhibition in the United States.*

**AS AN ARTIST I HAVE THE LIBERTY TO CHEAT.** Every interview is essentially a fiction—including this one you're reading right now. Yet every editor, as they're willfully jumbling up and rearranging their interviewee's words, feels a constant compulsion to not stray too far from what was really said. I don't have that. So much of this work—based on interviews with curator Marc-Olivier Wahler, filmmaker Michel Gondry, neurobiologist Leah Kelly, screenwriter Danny Rubin, artist Simon Fujiwara, theater director Alfredo Arias, and critic Donatien Grau—is instead about trying to find a way to express the very essence of their ideas. Cheating makes this a whole lot easier—I can take Gondry and put him in a bizarre dream taking place on a TGV train with Pablo Picasso sitting right across from us. I can place my subject in a dozen different places all at once, the kind of magic you can't do in real life. Everything in these phantasmagoric worlds exists only to amplify the interviewees' own ideas.

The title of this exhibition is taken from a 1995 novel about two illusionists named *The Prestige* by the British science fiction author Christopher Priest, later adapted for film in 2006 by Christopher Nolan. In both the book and film, it's explained that a magic trick consists of three parts: The Pledge, in which the magician presents you with an ordinary situation or object; The Turn, wherein the magician transforms that same object, or quite often makes it disappear; but the trick can't end here—the viewer demands resolution—if you saw your assistant in half, you can't just leave her like that—hence the third part: The Prestige. It's that pleasurable moment of resolution when the assistant is put back together again and the crowd roars: "Bravo!"

A lot of my work involves the mechanisms of storytelling. How is it that one comes to understand a world, be it real or fictional? What I like about the notion of The Pledge in a magic trick is that it implies an insidious corruption. One takes it as a given that the first things you see are true. The spectator then closely observes everything that follows, anticipating the trick. But they've already missed it. You see the whole premise was a lie.

The way we think isn't linear; nor is it completely rhizomatic. I'd say it's rhapsodic, which is to say that you have a story or a progression of multiple ideas with many little cul-de-sacs and digressions—and then there are digressions within the digressions. Eventually you always get back to the main thrust of the tale, even if that main thrust is made up of three or four concurrent ideas.

I grew up reading Time-Life encyclopedias. They had such a positive, almost naively utopian view of society, progress, and technological change that I think has completely disappeared in our time. Many of the images in the show are constructed out of photocopies from those same encyclopedias. There are also a lot of images derived from Flickr and Google Images, and books from the New York Public Library. My process involves a constant back and forth between analog and digital—photocopying and collaging, and then maybe scanning back in and further manipulating, reprinting and again drawing in or collaging. Everything is black-and-white, which serves to decontextualize each image from its original source and historical period.

I think throughout the twentieth century we tended to overvalue what's new about modernity. In reality, we exist in all eras at the same time; we're constantly interfacing with the past. There's a short essay by Borges called "Kafka and His Precursors": Rereading Kafka one day, Borges is struck by all these stories from the past that now seem so Kafkaesque. This is of course because now he has the lens of Kafka through which to reinterpret these writers. Borges implies that every new artist causes the past to become deeper and richer. The past isn't a dead, fixed place but one to which we're constantly looking back to, discovering things, seeing things anew. I think that's liberating.

— *As told to Allese Thomson*



## Alexandre Singh

### Monitor

I don't know if Alexandre Singh has ever read *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino. The novel, published in 1979, has a clever structure: ten chapters and ten stories, all of which are interrupted at the moment of suspense. Every chapter is written in a different genre and is credited to a different author. It's a tour de force of intertextuality; the reader gets lost in the confusion between transitions and reality. The narrative frame which holds the plot together begins as an instruction on how to read, and then follows the adventures of the 'Reader' (or 'You') – one male and one female – who will end up happily married to each other, as in all proper fairytales.

Perhaps I can assume that Singh has read *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* – after all, the artist himself could be a fictional character. But I'd only be replicating what Singh usually does to the (both real and fictional) subjects of his live performances, lectures, talks and plays, installations and sculptures. He is a skilled storyteller, as well as master browser, especially now that the Father of Stories – one of the characters of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, a blind contemporary Homer, who endlessly narrates stories happening in times and places he ignores – has become the Internet.

Singh's exhibition at Monitor was titled 'Assembly Instructions: The Pledge', as was his show in September 2011 at Art: Concept, in Paris. Both exhibitions were displayed in the same way: a hand-drawn dotted line across a white wall, which linked dozens of elegant black and white photocopied and framed collages, arranged in non-linear sequences. Furthermore, both shows were based on the same printed source: issue 14 of *Palais* (Palais de Tokyo's magazine), published last autumn. Singh interviewed six people – playwright Alfredo Arias, artist Simon Fujiwara, filmmaker Michel Gondry, critic Donatien Grau, neurobiologist Leah Kelly, writer Danny Rubin and ex-Palais de Tokyo Director Marc-Olivier Wahler – who he then fictionalized by transforming them into a 96-page self-portrait of the artist as Author.



In Rome, three diagrams were devoted to Arias, Fujiwara and Wahler. In each room, a copy of the original texts from *Palais* was also available for reading. The thread I could most easily follow was Fujiwara's, because I know his work. In print, Singh has staged his portrait as a scripted performance, with an old Fujiwara sitting alongside a young one, thus mimicking some of Fujiwara's own narrative strategies: the father/son dialectic, younger/older self in dialogue, and the impossibility of unifying the narration into a plot. The images on show in the gallery included reproductions of photographs and old prints of the Tower of Babel and winged Assyrian lions, as well as some of the giant 'primitive' phalluses Fujiwara produced for the last Manifesta in Murcia, Spain: it was easy to get lost in nostalgic reveries and unreliable archaeology. Such an approach is also, of course, a recurring strategy for Singh, who constantly tests his reader's ability to follow cross-references.

The repetitive visual scheme, the flurry of multi-dimensional images, the hyperlinks and constant *détournements*: all obviously echo the way we surf the Internet. But ultimately, there's something funereal in the clinical way Singh has singled out a neat strategy for mourning our loss of control over the complicated way we organize memory – once, an ability only humans possessed. Now, assembly language is also a programming language used for computers and machine operation codes are usually called mnemonics.

**Barbara Casavecchia**



Alexandre Singh *Assembly Instructions (The Pledge- Marc-Olivier Wahler)* (Detail), 2011, Courtesy of the Artist, art:concept, Paris; Monitor, Rome; Spruth-Magers, Berlin

# art press

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**ALEXANDRE SINGH** INTERVIEW  
**PERFORMA** : FESTIVAL À NEW YORK  
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# ALEXANDRE SINGH

## DE LA MÉMOIRE DU MONDE

interview par Anaël Pigeat

Alexandre Singh est un narrateur, tour à tour performeur, sculpteur ou dessinateur. Son œuvre explore la mémoire du monde, en s'inspirant de Lovecraft, de Molière, du roman gothique, mais aussi de séries télévisées ou de recherches scientifiques. Chez lui, l'écriture est centrale. Ses textes sont parfois accompagnés de performances dans lesquelles il mène lui-même le récit, s'appuyant sur des images projetées au mur, dans une atmosphère qui mêle le réel et la fiction.

Depuis 2008, Alexandre Singh réalise la série des *Assembly Instructions*, des assemblages d'images inspirés de sources les plus diverses, des *Essais* de Montaigne aux magasins Ikea. Ils sont parfois également accompagnés d'une performance. Il écrit aussi des pièces de théâtre, comme *la Critique de l'École des objets*, ou *Dialogue avec les objets*. Ces deux textes sont présentés sous la forme d'installations sonores très théâtralisées : des objets posés sur des socles dialoguent entre humour et gravité. Des voix enregistrées par des comédiens

sont diffusées dans la pièce, et l'éclairage souligne la vivacité des répliques. Exposé aux États-Unis (notamment à New York au MoMA-PS1, au New Museum, à White Columns), le travail d'Alexandre Singh a récemment été présenté en Europe (Manifesta 8, Palais de Tokyo, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris). Né en 1980, ce Franco-Anglais d'origine indienne vit actuellement à New York, et avec un léger accent britannique, s'exprime comme il conçoit ses œuvres, par des associations spirituelles et érudites.

■ **Votre travail revêt des formes très variées, entre collage et performance ; comment êtes-vous venu à la pratique artistique ?**

D'abord je ne suis pas sûr d'y être arrivé aujourd'hui. Ou peut-être par accident. Je suis allé à Oxford étudier l'art, en pensant que je ferais éventuellement autre chose plus tard. Quand j'étais jeune, j'étais très intéressé par les domaines créatifs, comme la musique vidéo ou la publicité. Je le suis toujours d'ailleurs. Et puis il m'est apparu qu'aujourd'hui, à la différence d'autrefois, l'art offre l'opportunité de travailler dans des domaines variés sans trop de contraintes. C'est pour ça que, pour le moment, je fais de l'art. D'ailleurs, j'admire des artistes, Shakespeare par exemple, qui sont tout à la fois, qui ne sont pas seulement comédiens ou auteurs de théâtre. Les opéras de Mozart ont une grande influence sur ce que je fais, mais aussi les films de Terry Gilliam et Woody Allen, des séries télévisées comme *The West Wing*, des dessins animés comme *South Park*. Mais c'est la littérature qui m'influence probablement le plus, surtout les auteurs qui sont des maîtres de l'invention narrative : Diderot, Potocki, Dante, Borges.

#### UN MONDE IMAGINAIRE

*L'écriture est au cœur de votre pratique. Les Assembly Instructions (2008-2011) sont souvent accompagnées d'un texte, l'installation la Critique de l'École des Objets (2010) est inspirée de l'École des femmes de Molière, et votre roman The Marke of the Third Stripe (2008) qui retrace l'histoire d'Adi Dassler, fondateur de la marque Adidas, prend la forme d'un roman gothique dans lequel les histoires s'emboîtent les unes dans les autres.*

L'écriture est un monde imaginaire. Une des choses qui me motivent le plus et dont on ne parle pas beaucoup dans l'art contemporain, c'est simplement le plaisir de créer, de se perdre. Souvent lorsqu'on va très loin dans un autre monde, on s'aperçoit qu'il est fait d'hallucinations, comme un rêve, et qu'il évoque parfois des questions existentielles ou sociétales. Dans le théâtre ou le cinéma que j'aime, le texte est essentiel. Beaucoup d'artistes se sont intéressés à l'écriture, notamment à travers la vidéo, mais il me semble que si la qualité des images est souvent excellente, le texte et le jeu des acteurs sont toujours plus faibles. Quant au roman gothique, c'est comme *les Mille et une Nuits*, une histoire

qui fait référence à la forme qui la contient, un procédé que j'utilise beaucoup. Et c'est aussi l'idée de la sculpture.

#### DESSINER UNE PENSÉE

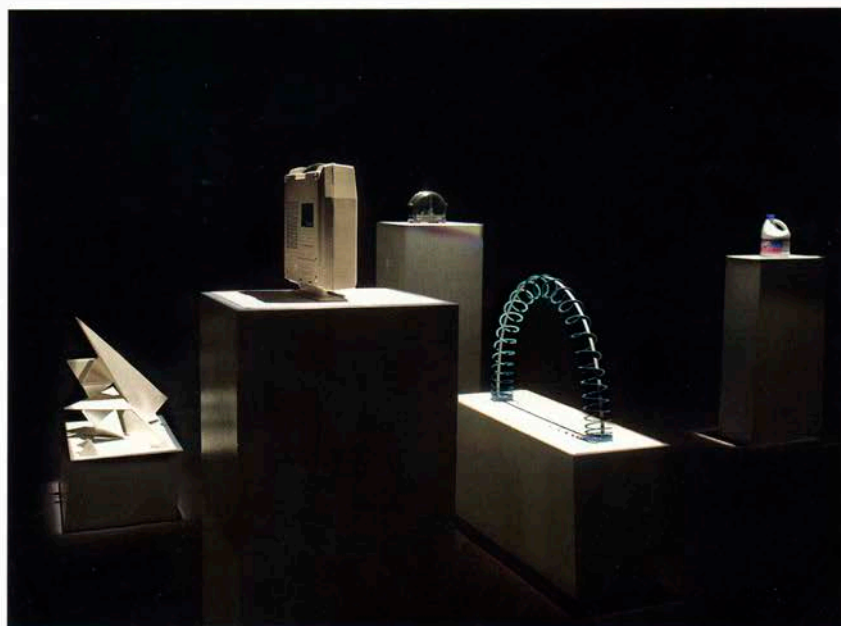
*Écriture et sculpture sont chez vous étroitement liées.*

Dans la performance *The Alkahest* (2009), je raconte une série d'histoires qui s'entremêlent. Un rétroprojecteur illumine la salle d'une seule couleur. L'un des thèmes de cette pièce est la sculpture, un genre qui parle d'abord de transformation d'une forme en une autre, d'un matériau en un autre – selon la définition très narrative de Greenberg. C'est Dieu qui prend une côte d'Adam pour faire Ève, Ovide avec Didon et Énée, *l'Apprenti sorcier* de Goethe que Walt Disney a repris pour *Fantasia*. Dans cette performance, on trouve des golems, un alchimiste qui crée l'Alkahest, un liquide qui peut se dissoudre avec le chaudron qui le contient. Cette performance est très textuelle car je raconte une histoire pendant trois heures et trente minutes ; le rétroprojecteur ne fonctionne que comme le feu autour du camp. C'est « antivisuel » et pourtant l'univers que je crée est très visuel : j'utilise la technique des scénarios de films, un récit à la troisième personne et au présent. Les ressemblances entre la sculpture et l'alchimie m'intéressent beaucoup.

*À partir de 2008 s'est imposée la série des Assembly Instructions, faite d'assemblages d'images trouvées, découpées et collées, puis organisées en diagrammes muraux. Ces « modes d'emploi » pourraient être des modes d'emploi du monde. Bien sûr ! C'est s'aventurer dans la tentative*

absurde de faire une théorie de tout. Plutôt que d'écrire un essai, je voulais dessiner une pensée. Je m'intéresse aux *Essais* de Montaigne : on y voit la pensée se dérouler dans le temps. À la question de savoir comment les pères devraient traiter leurs fils, Montaigne répond : « Au début je pensais ça ; j'ai lu Cicéron qui dit ça ; j'ai parlé avec quelqu'un dans une taverne, il m'a dit ça ». Ce n'est pas une argumentation, ni de la dialectique, c'est très humain, un peu socratique. C'est une bonne analogie avec mes dessins. Les idées qui sous-tendent les *Assembly Instructions* peuvent être complétées, certaines sont simples et d'autres savantes ; je ne fais pas de hiérarchie – c'est l'aspect britannique de mon travail.

Il y a par exemple une pièce consacrée à Ikea. Pour des raisons professionnelles (j'y achète souvent des cadres), je passe beaucoup de temps dans ces magasins. Partout dans le monde, ils ont presque le même plan, surtout à l'étage où se trouve une succession de chambres artificielles. Cela m'a fait penser aux « palais de la mémoire » de la Renaissance et aux arts mnémoniques. Peut-être que tous ces magasins avaient été conçus comme une conspiration, une entreprise secrète de préservation de la connaissance humaine, qui serait contenue tout entière dans ces arrangements apparemment arbitraires de couettes, de jouets, de canapés, de vingt livres suédois posés sur des étagères, toujours les mêmes ? Ou alors ce serait le monde qui serait l'index des magasins Ikea ? Et en changeant l'arrangement de ces objets, on changerait l'ordre du monde, on détruirait ou on créerait des réalités, sans que les gens le sachent ?



À gauche/left: « The Alkahest » (1<sup>re</sup> partie / part one). Performance à la galerie Sprüth Magers, Berlin. 2011 (Toutes les photos, court. galerie Art : Concept, Paris)  
Ci-contre/right: « Critique de l'école des objets ». 2010. Vue de l'installation au / installation view at Palais de Tokyo. 2011.  
*The School of Objects Criticized*



*Les Assembly Instructions sont composés d'associations d'images très diverses, portant sur des sujets quotidiens ou historiques comme An Immodern Romanticism (2009), Emotional Pornography (2008), ou encore The Pledge (2011). Aux vertus des ordinateurs, vous semblez préférer les planches de liège, le papier, les punaises, et la photocopie en noir et blanc qui permet une homogénéisation des images, comme le passage du temps sur les souvenirs.*

Les effets analogiques me semblent plus élégants que les impressionnants effets numériques. J'aime beaucoup mélanger les temps et les lieux pour créer une nouvelle réalité par le collage ; le noir et blanc aide à cela – son seul danger est qu'on le trouve nostalgique. Dans un collage, l'addition de deux éléments produit autre chose que leur simple somme ; c'est très surréaliste. Mes images, qui viennent d'encyclopédies *Time Life* ou d'Internet (Flickr en particulier), dictent elles-mêmes le projet de manière organique. Elles ne servent pas à concrétiser une idée abstraite mais à aller un peu plus loin.

Voici un exemple d'associations. En regardant *Sex and the City*, je réfléchissais au prénom de Carrie Bradshaw. En français, une « carie » est une dent gâtée ; le mot « punk » vient d'une langue des Indiens chez qui il désignait un tronc d'arbre pourri, précieux pour faire du feu ; au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, un « punk kid » était l'« apprenti d'un criminel » ; puis dans les années 1970, des jeunes gens nihilistes se disaient « punks », morts de l'intérieur. C'est intéressant en soi, mais c'est une anecdote insuffisante pour être le sujet d'une œuvre d'art. Dans *l'Impromptu de Versailles*, Molière

répond à la critique qui lui est faite de mettre « trop de reportage » dans ses textes en disant qu'il montre plutôt qu'il ne dit. C'est ce qui se passe dans les *Assembly Instructions*.

#### HUMOUR ET MÉLANCOLIE

*Les Assembly Instructions évoquent tour à tour l'accrochage des Salons au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, la pensée structuraliste et le principe psychanalytique de l'association libre.*

C'est vrai, et ils évoquent aussi la Renaissance flamande ; chez Brueghel, on trouve des images dans l'image. À Rome, j'ai vu récemment *l'École d'Athènes* de Raphaël : Zoroastre tient le globe céleste et le visage de Platon est inspiré de celui de Léonard de Vinci. Cette intensité de détails m'intéresse beaucoup, comme les diagrammes ésotériques et la Kabbale. Mais la magie du prestidigitateur crée le pathétique autant que l'émerveillement, ce que Woody Allen exprime, à mon avis, parfaitement.

*Les Assembly instructions sont parfois accompagnés par une conférence-performance dans laquelle, devenu comédien à l'accent britannique rassurant, vous montrez des images avec un rétroprojecteur, objet aujourd'hui devenu presque désuet.*

Ces performances sont quelque chose en plus, *and yet more, and yet more...* Je ne suis pas croyant, ni en l'homme, ni en Dieu, ni en un pouvoir absolu de l'art. J'aime jouer avec les choses, faire une mutation, un renversement – pas du tout radical. Mozart ou Shakespeare se sont inspirés de leurs propres œuvres. Aristophane a réécrit *les Nuées* à deux reprises. Avec la performance, les visi-

teurs revoient les images autrement. Ce n'est pas une explication, juste une autre façon de voir, encore plus hallucinatoire. Le rythme du discours est très important. Quant au rétroprojecteur, c'est une manière simple de montrer ces images, une photocopie de la photocopie – dépourvue de toute esthétisation nostalgique de la technique.

*Pour la Critique de l'École des objets, c'est de Molière que vous vous êtes inspiré. Vous le parodiez, transformant la pièce de théâtre dont il parle dans la Critique de l'École des femmes en une exposition à propos de laquelle des objets conversent à bâtons rompus. Le choix de Molière comme référence est aujourd'hui peu commun pour un artiste.*

Dans le métro à Paris, on voit souvent des affiches pour plusieurs pièces de Molière dans la même soirée ; cela me paraît assez actuel en France !

*L'humour occupe une place fondamentale dans votre travail et se double souvent d'une tonalité mélancolique. Dans le Dialogue des objets, par exemple, Lucky Strike et Marlboro Red, le père et le fils, parlent de la mort.*

Pour moi, toutes les meilleures œuvres sont ainsi... Woody Allen est maître en la matière.

*Dans la Critique de l'École des objets, le grille-pain, la « sculpture informe » et la radio, sont posés sur des socles, comme dans une exposition. À travers une étonnante mise en abîme, ils semblent célébrer les noces de Duchamp et de Molière.*

Le fait que ce soient des objets qui s'expriment apporte humour et légèreté (comme les animaux dans les *Fables* de La Fontaine). Seule la conversation, et quelques effets de lumière, donnent une vertigineuse impression de mouvement. Il y a aussi un lien entre la fonction de ces objets et le profil psychologique du personnage qu'ils représentent. Sergueï, la bouteille de javel néo-post-marxiste qui aime draguer les filles, confesse qu'il se comporte ainsi en raison de la date de péremption (sur son derrière) qu'il ne veut pas voir. Connaître la date de sa mort, c'est déjà mourir.

#### Quel est votre prochain projet ?

Je travaille sur le texte d'une pièce dans le style d'Aristophane, *les Humains* (il y aura un chœur, de la musique, un procès ; l'humour sera à la fois rustique et sophistiqué). C'est la naissance des hommes et des dieux. La scène se divise entre un monde dionysiaque dont le maître est le lapin Nesquik, et un monde apollinien régi par le sculpteur Charles Ray (Dieu l'a chargé de créer les humains qui sont des sculptures néo-classiques). Il y a quelque chose de Pinocchio, une histoire tragique sur la transformation, l'alchimie. C'est l'histoire du golem, de Frankenstein, un modèle universel de notre culture. ■

#### Alexandre Singh

Né à / born Bordeaux en / in 1980

Vit et travaille à / lives and works in New York

Expositions personnelles récentes / Recent shows:

2011 *The Pledge*, Monitor, Rome

*The Pledge*, galerie art : concept, Paris

*La Critique de l'École des objets*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris

*Le Dialogue des objets*, Art Basel 42: Statements, Bâle, Sprüth Magers, Berlin

À venir / upcoming : *The Pledge*, Drawing Center, New York, 18 juillet - 4 septembre 2012

À gauche/left: « Assembly Instructions (Ikea) », 2008.

37 Collages (encadrés). Exposition « Dynasty »,

musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. 2010

37 framed xerox collages and dotted pencil lines

Ci-dessous/below: « Assembly Instructions (Emotional

Pornography) ». 12 collages (encadrés).

12 framed xerox collages and dotted pencil lines

## Alexandre Singh The Memory of the World

**Whether performing, sculpting or drawing, Alexandre Singh is a narrator. His work explores the world's memory, drawing inspiration from sources as diverse as Lovecraft, Molière, Gothic novels, TV programs and scientific research. No matter what the medium, writing is central. Sometimes he performs his texts, accompanied by images projected on the wall in an atmosphere mixing reality and fiction.**

Since 2008 Alexandre Singh has been making a series called *Assembly Instructions*, assemblages of images inspired by everything from the *Essays* of Montaigne to Ikea stores. These, too, are sometimes accompanied by performances. He also writes plays, like *The School of Objects Criticized* and *Dialogue of the Objects*. These two texts are presented in the form of highly theatricalized sound installations: objects set on pedestals carry out a dialogue that is sometimes serious and sometimes funny. The recorded voices of actors are played back, and the lightening emphasizes the liveliness of the dialog. Singh's work has been widely seen in the U.S. (especially in New York, at MoMA-PS1, the New Museum and White Columns), and more recently presented in Europe (Manifesta 8, Palais de Tokyo, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris). Born in 1980, this Franco-Englishman of Indian origin now lives in New York. With a slight British accent he explains how he conceives his pieces through witty and erudite associations.

*Your work takes very varied forms, ranging from collage to performance. How did you come to be an artist?*

First of all, I'm not sure that I'm there yet. Or maybe it happened by accident. I went to Oxford to study art, thinking that I'd end

up doing something else later on. When I was young I was very interested in creative fields such as music videos and advertizing. In fact, I still am. And then I realized that today, unlike the past, art makes it possible to work in various domains without too much constraint. That's why, for the moment, I make art.

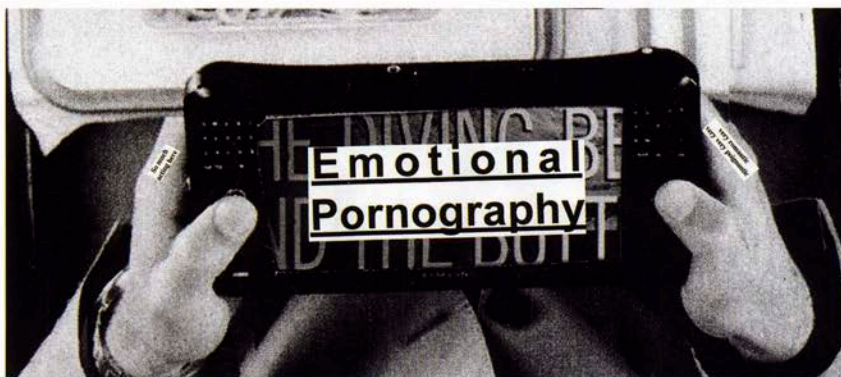
Plus I admire artists like Shakespeare, for example, who do everything, instead of just sticking to acting or playwriting. My work has been very influenced not only by Mozart's operas but also the films of Terry Gilliam and Woody Allen, TV series like *The West Wing* and cartoons like *South Park*. But probably my biggest influence has come from literature, especially writers who are masters of narrative invention such as Diderot, Potocki, Dante and Borges.

*Writing is at the heart of your practice. Your Assembly Instructions (2008-2011) are often accompanied by texts, the installation The School of Objects Criticized (2010) was inspired by Molière's L'École des femmes, and your novel The Marque of the Third Stripe (2008), about the life of Adidas founder Adi Dassler, takes the form of a Gothic novel with stories within stories.*

Writing is an imaginary world. One of the things I find most motivating, and which doesn't get talked about much in contemporary art, is simply the pleasure of creating, of getting lost in that process. Often when you go very deeply into another world you realize that it's made up of hallucinations, like a dream, and that it sometimes calls up existential or social questions. Text is an essential element in the kind of theater and movies I like. Lots of artists are interested in writing, especially in regard to videos, but I find that even when the images are excellent the text and the acting are always much weaker. As for Gothic novels, it's like *A Thousand and One Nights*, a story that references the form that contains it, a procedure I'm very fond of. That's also the idea of sculpture.

*For you writing and sculpture are closely linked.*

In my performance *The Alkahest* (2009), I tell a series of intertwined stories. An overhead projector fills a room with a single color. One of this piece's themes is sculpture, a medium that's about the transformation of one form into another, one material into another, according to Green-





was quite sure it was, etc. Planning is a debate. In the spacious fountain leads the eye t after an hour or so have monkeys who prance ab for a bit. It is much the sa British architects who I money they needed, the

berg's very narrative definition. God takes one of Adam's ribs to make Eve, Ovid does something similar with Dido and Aeneas, and then there's Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, reprised in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. This performance involves golems and an alchemist who creates Alkahest, a liquid that can dissolve along with the cauldron that contains it. This is a very textual performance because I tell a story that lasts three and a half hours. The overhead projector is really no more than a campfire. It's very "anti-visual," and yet the world I create is very visual. Like a film script, the story is told in the third person and present tense. I'm fascinated by the analogy between alchemy and sculpture.

*You started making Assembly Instructions in 2008. This series comprises found images that you cut up and glue together to make wall diagrams. They could be considered instructions for assembling the world.*

Of course! This is a venture into an absurd attempt to produce a theory of everything. Rather than write an essay I wanted to sketch out a thought process. I'm interested in Montaigne's *Essays* where you see someone's thought unfolding through time. To the question of how a father should treat his son, Montaigne replies, "At first I thought such-and-such. I read Cicero who said such-and-such. I talked to someone in a tavern who told me such-and-such." This isn't argumentation or a dialectic, just very human, a little Socratic. That's a good analogy to my drawings. The underlying ideas in the *Assembly Instructions* are there to be completed. Some of them are simple and others more erudite. There's no hierarchization—that's the British aspect of my work.

Take my piece about Ikea. I spend a lot of time there because of my work (I buy a lot of their picture frames). These stores have the same layout in practically every coun-

try, especially when you get to the floor with a succession of model bedrooms. It made me think of Renaissance palaces of memory and mnemonics. Maybe all these stores were conceived as a conspiracy, a secret enterprise to preserve human knowledge, containing it all within these apparently arbitrary arrangements of duvets, toys, couches and bookcases that always hold the same 20 books in Swedish on their shelves? Or perhaps it's the world that serves as the index for the Ikea stores? If you changed the arrangement of these objects, would you change the order of the world, destroy or create realities without anyone noticing?

*Very diverse associations of images, sometimes quotidian and at others historic, go into the making of the Assembly Instructions, from An Immodern Romanticism (2009 and Emotional Pornography (2008) to The Pledge (2011). Instead of computers, despite their virtues, you seem to prefer corkboards, paper, thumbtacks and black-and-white photos that allow a homogenization of images, just as the passage of time does with memories.*

It seems to be that analogue procedures produce more elegant results than impressive digital effects. I like using collage to mix places and times to create a new reality. Black and white is useful in that regard; the only danger is that it might seem nostalgic. In a collage the addition of two elements produces something more than just their sum. It's very surrealist. My images, which come from the *Time-Life* encyclopedias or the Web (especially Flickr), are what dictate the project in an organic way. They aren't used to concretize an abstract idea but to go a little further.

Here's a sample of my associations. While watching *Sex and the City* I started thinking about Carrie Bradshaw's first name. In French, *carie* means a tooth with a cavity; the word punk comes from an Indian language (it meant a rotten tree trunk used as kindling); in the nineteenth century a "punk kid" meant an apprentice criminal; then in the 1970s nihilistic youth called themselves "punks" to mean dead inside. All that's very interesting anecdotally but not enough to be the subject of an artwork. In his *Impromptu de Versailles*, Molière responded to a criticism that he put "too much reportage" in his texts by saying that he shows more than he says. That's what's going on in the *Assembly Instructions*.

*The Assembly Instructions are reminiscent, variously, of the way artworks were hung in nineteenth century Parisian Salons, structuralism and psychoanalytic free association.*

That's true, and they also bring to mind the Flemish Renaissance—like Brueghel's images within images. Recently in Rome I saw Raphael's *The School of Athens*, where Zoroaster holds a star-studded globe and Plato's face is inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's. I'm really fascinated by intensity of details, like in esoteric diagrams and the Kabala. But the magician's magic is creates as much pathos as wonder, as Woody Allen so perfectly expresses, in my opinion.

Sometimes the Assembly Instructions are accompanied by a lecture-performance in which you, in the persona of an actor with a reassuring British accent, show images using an overhead projector, a piece of technology that's become almost obsolete nowadays. These performances are a little something extra, and yet more, and yet more... I'm not a believer, neither in Man nor God, nor in any absolute power of art. I like to play with things, change them, turn them upside down—nothing radical. Mozart and Shakespeare were inspired by their own

À gauche/left: « Assembly Instructions (Emotional Pornography) ». 12 collages (encadrés).

12 framed xerox collages and dotted pencil lines  
Ci-dessous/below: « Assembly Instructions Lecture (Ikea, Manzoni, Klein) ». Performance à White Columns, New York, 2009

works. Aristophanes rewrote *The Clouds* twice. When you add performance, visitors see the images differently this time. It's not an explanation, just another, even more hallucinatory way to see things. The speech rhythm is very important. I use the overhead projector because it's a simple way to show the images, a photocopy of the photocopy, in a way. But there's no nostalgic aestheticization of this technology.

You were inspired by Molière for your *School of Objects Criticized*. It's a parody of him, transforming the play *L'Ecole des femmes* into an exhibition about which objects hold a pretty freewheeling conversation. It's not very common today for artists to be into Molière. In the Paris metro you often see posters for several productions of his plays occurring the same evening, so I think Molière is still in the house in France!

Humor is often a basic part of your work, even if it's often overlaid with melancholy. In *Dialogue of the Objects* for example, *Lucky Strike* and *Marlboro Red*, father and son, talk about death.

I think that about sums up all good art. Including that past master, Woody Allen.

In *The School of Objects Criticized*, a toaster, "abstract sculpture" and radio are set on pedestals like sculptures in an exhibition. An

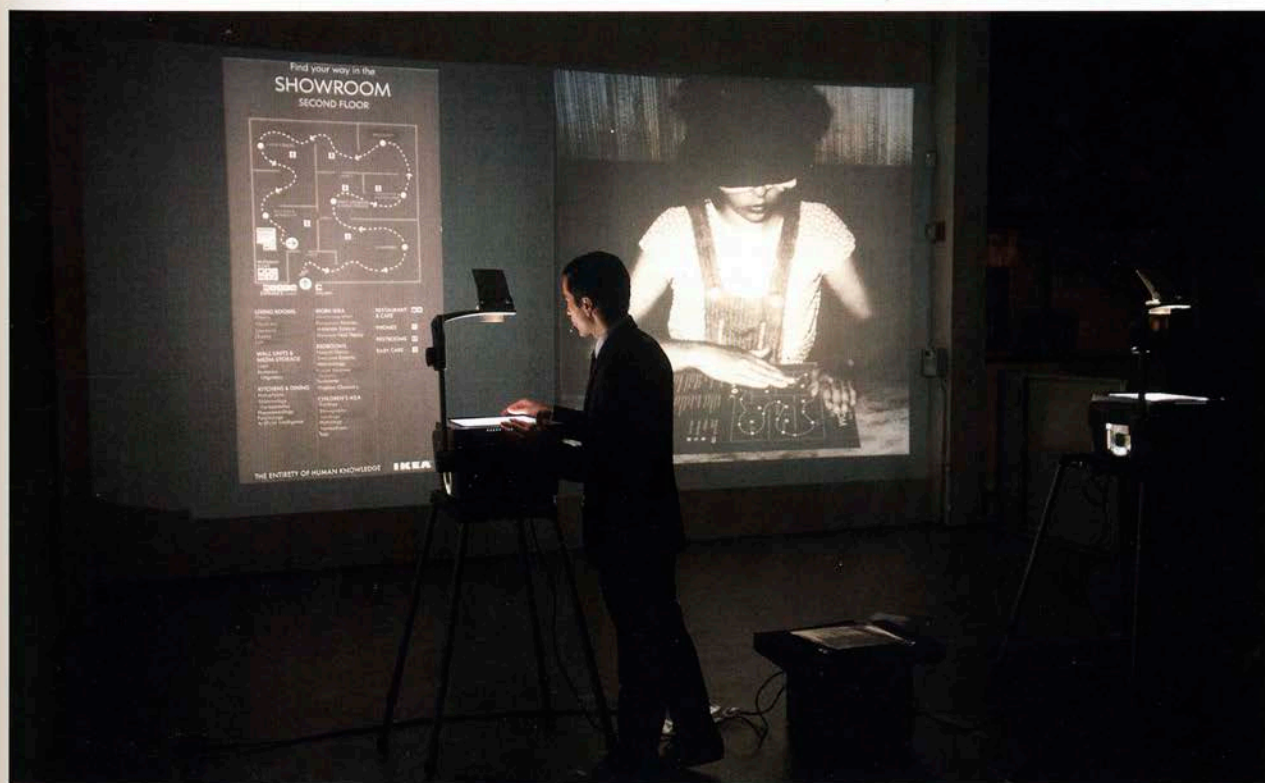
incredible set of associations turns them into the wedding of Duchamp and Molière.

The fact that it's the objects who are talking adds a touch of humor and lightness, like the animals in La Fontaine's *Fables*. The conversation and lighting effects produce a dizzying sense of movement all by themselves. There's also a link between the function of these objects and the psychological profile of the character they represent. Serguei, the neo-post-Marxist bleach bottle who likes to pick up girls, confesses that he behaves like that because of the use-by date stamped on his ass that he'd prefer not to see. Once you know when you're going to die you're already dead.

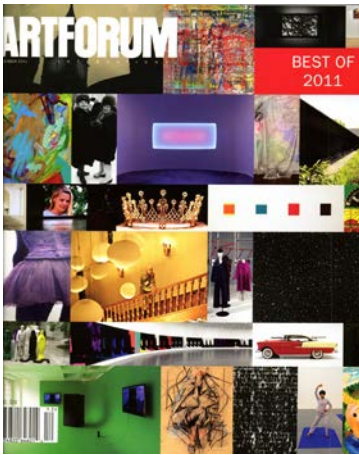
What's your next project?

I'm working on the text for a piece in the style of Aristophanes called *The Humans* (there will be a choir, music and a trial; the humor will be simultaneously homespun and sophisticated). The stage is divided into a Dionysian world whose master is the rabbit Nesquik, and an Apollonian world run by the sculptor Charles Ray (God commissioned him to make human beings, who are neoclassical sculptures). There's a bit of Pinocchio in it, a tragic story about transformation and alchemy. A story about golems and Frankenstein, a universal model of our culture. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff







## PARIS

# Alexandre Singh

## ART : CONCEPT

The 2006 film based on British novelist Christopher Priest's book *The Prestige* (1995) identifies three key moments of a magic trick: the pledge, when an object is presented; the "turn," when that object is "disappeared"; and the prestige, the moment it reappears—the quarter drawn from a child's ear, the rabbit pulled out of a hat. Palais de Tokyo director Marc-Olivier Wahler asked artist Alexandre Singh, versed in storytelling and performance, to consider the first of these, the magician's pledge, for the September 2011 issue of the institution's magazine, *PALAIS/*. Granted carte blanche, Singh took the pages of the publication as a stage, presenting—in the form of theater scripts illustrated with his drawings and collages—his conversations with seven thinkers: theater director Alfredo Arias, artist Simon Fujiwara, filmmaker Michel Gondry, Proust scholar Donatien Grau, neuroscientist Leah Kelly, screenwriter Danny Rubin, and Wahler.

For his first solo exhibition at Art : Concept, Singh amplified and distorted the content of three of these exchanges, rendering quasi portraits in elaborate mappings of the words, thoughts, and personalities of his interviewees. Each work features Xeroxed collages, under glass and neatly surrounded by in a white painted wood frame. The photocopies yield flat, grainy images that equalize a diverse range of source material. Almost every image was linked to a larger visual network by precise rays of dotted pencil lines made directly on the gallery wall. The



resulting matrix evoked detailed stage directions, instructions for the box step, or a corporate flowchart.

One of the forty-three images in *Assembly Instruction (The Pledge: Marc-Olivier Wahler)* (all works 2011) pictures Lucio Fontana standing before a sliced canvas, a gesture Singh cites as a precedent for the surgical cuts that enable his collages. Two identical headshots of Wahler are labeled MONSIEUR L'ORIGINAL and MONSIEUR LE REPLICANT (Mr. Original and Mr. Copy). This example of formal doubling is one of many that define Singh's works; the act of duplication creates space for what he calls "tangential logic." For *Assembly Instruction (The Pledge: Leah Kelly)*, the artist presented thirty-seven black-and-white images of, among other things, mice, the human brain, Chinese porcelain, and two rather generic-looking fish, one marked ILLUSION, the other REALITY. This last pairing refers to the refraction of light rays as they pass through the water and the resulting shift in the creatures' apparent locations. Also for this work, Singh embellished a copy of a Dürer print of Adam and Eve by drawing a tennis racket into Adam's hand and inserted gorillas into the stands of a Big Ten basketball game. Sports are not an accidental reference for Singh, author of *The Marque of the Third Stripe* (2010), a book-length gothic fictionalization of the life of Adidas founder Adolf Dassler. Providing a system of regulated (almost scripted) interaction, sports are as neatly pinned to the playing field as cinema to the screen or performance to the stage.

Installed in the back room of the gallery, a separate, almost theatrical space, *Assembly Instruction (The Pledge: Alfredo Arias)* orchestrates forty-seven images, some of which depict scenes appropriated from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *Richard II*. Spotlights, masks, a penguin tagged with the term MYOPIA, and the cover of the *Birds* volume from the *Life Nature Library* round out the cast. In these works, Singh reveals as much about his sitters as he invents, weaving each character into his own universe. Singh will, as Shakespeare put it in *Twelfth Night*, his famous tale of deception and disguise, most certainly "draw the curtain and show you the picture."

—Lillian Davies

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# Art Review:

Contains 6% SIGURDUR GUDMUNDSSON; 12% HEIDI SPECKER;  
35% FLUORESCENT PANTONE 802; 3 COMIC ARTISTS

## Alexandre SINGH



plus  
**BACK TO REALITY**  
Can art reengage with daily life?

**SOFIA COPPOLA**  
on **ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE**

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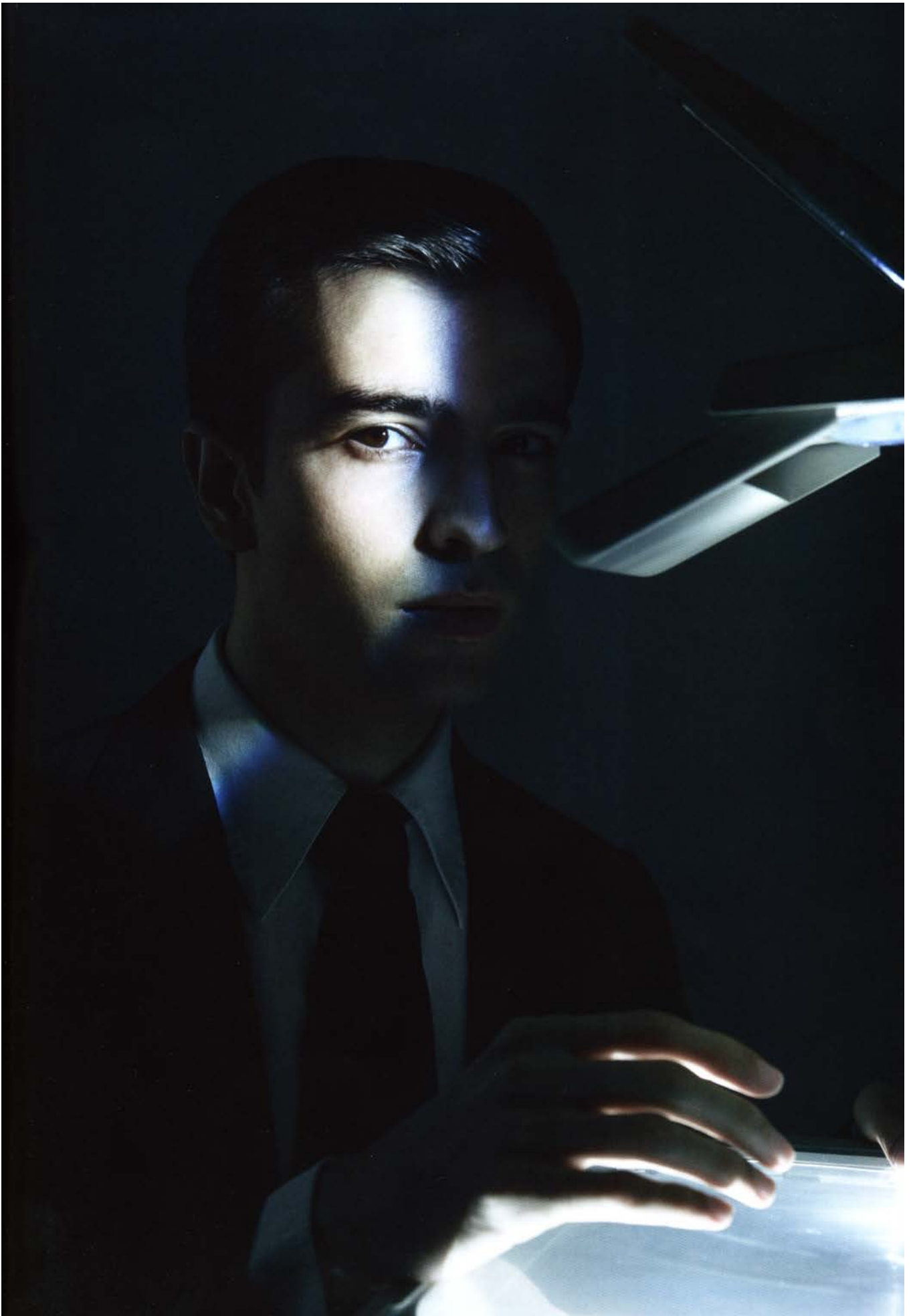
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SINGH

gaming with time and space,  
A FEMINIST TOASTER,  
alternative creation myth,  
gnostic code, QUICK-  
CRITIQUE TENDENCY,  
corporate interpenetration,  
banal one-dimensionality,  
TRUTH UNDERWRITTEN  
BY WIKIS, apophenia

words **MARTIN HERBERT**  
portrait **JACOB SUTTON**



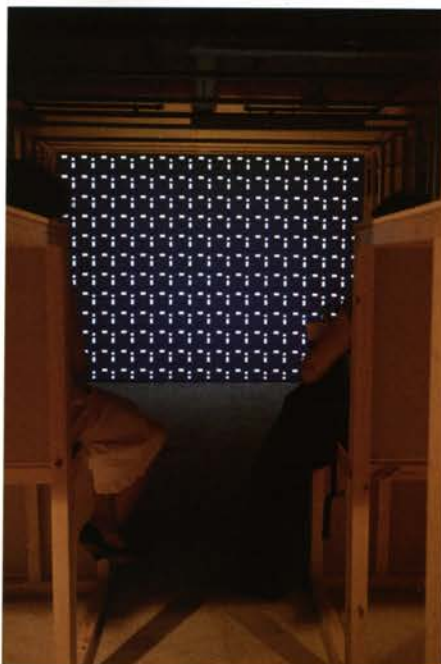
Alexandre Singh is telling me about a play he's just started writing. The formal devices – chorus, dirty jokes, actors addressing the audience – will be borrowed from Aristophanes; the set, he predicts, will merge traditional scenography with sculptural installation. "It's a comedy of sorts entitled *The Humans*, a kind of alternative creation myth," says the thirty-one-year-old artist. "The story pivots on a conflict between the newly nascent humans and their creator, and between the opposing forces of raw Dionysian fecundity – personified by a character based on the Nesquik chocolate bunny – and controlled Apollonian perfection, personified by a character named Charles Ray."

Spend time in Singh's cosmos and you begin to accept statements like this with barely a blink. In his intricate, modular crossbreeds of installation, film, theatrical performance and sculpture, linear time routinely collapses, reality and fictions from diverse temporal points meet and meld, tales frequently swallow their own tails and the viewer performs the role of dazed, delighted navigator.

It's no surprise, either, to find Singh busily engaged in writing. He has organised his art around literary acts ever since his breakthrough work *The Marque of the Third Stripe* (2008). This, a sculptural/video installation featuring a single screen surrounded by wooden architectural structures and Adidas trainers raised up like reliquaries, recast the sportswear company's success story as the result of founder Adolf 'Adi' Dassler making a pact with evil, and immediately demonstrated Singh's taste for layered, self-aware staging. In voiceover, several narrators tell the tale in stages, their stories – set in 'a universe of reversed time and geography' – nesting into each other: the last narrator suggests he's about to tell the first chapter, Möbius strip-style. The video, meanwhile, functions like a gnostic code, with an eight-by-eight pattern of black and white squares corresponding to each word of the tale. *The Marque...*, which went through several iterations and culminated in a chunky, antiquated-looking book filled with wiki-style entries purporting to verify the storyline, seemed both to reveal a secret and to undermine its own claim to truth in the process.

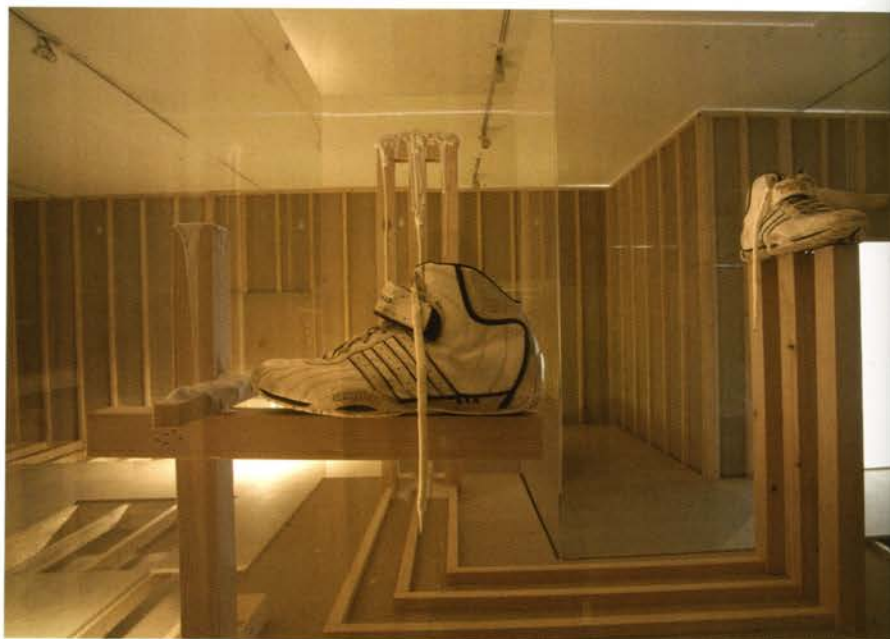
Singh, who in person (though we're communicating by email) speaks in well-organised paragraphs with barely an 'um', is naturally, confidently loquacious. But his art's linguistic emphasis, he says, wasn't simply about doing what came naturally. At college he was fascinated by the labyrinthine worlds fashioned by Matthew Barney and Mike Nelson, but "though these artists' works suggested real characters and stories, these things were never made explicit – it somehow seemed wrong or impossible or at least highly problematic to try to weld text and objects together. And I'm always attracted to what's difficult to do."

In the past four years, Singh has developed that intersection radically, indulging in the process his taste for reflexivity. In *Unclehead* (2008), a collaborative installation with Rita



this page, both images: **The Marque of the Third Stripe**, 2008 (installation view, Royal College of Art, London), wood, chipboard, vitrines, Belgian waffles, Adidas trainers, plaster and 80 min video

facing page, from top: Alexandre Singh & Rita Sobral Campos, **Unclehead**, 2008 (installation view, Museu da Electricidade, Lisbon); **The School for Objects Criticized**, 2010 (installation view, New Museum, New York, 2010), photo: Benoit Palley



Sobral Campos for a museum in Lisbon, the sculptural languages are set against each other. On the one hand, seen in vitrines and on plinths, everyday objects have been manipulated in order that a shared, near-corporate visual language might unify them (engraved into the baseball bat, for example, is a videogame controller that appears elsewhere); but there's also a barricade in the space, a 'revolutionary structure' that seems to reflect anger at this smooth homogenisation. Indeed papier mâché pellets appear to have been thrown at some of the products on display. *The School for Objects Criticized* (2010), meanwhile, an array of objects on plinths which, in the work's soundtrack, appear to be in dialogue with each other. Here, a feminist toaster, a Marxist bleach bottle and a pair of intellectual tape recorder offer overbearing analyses of *The School for Objects Criticized*, another (unrealised) Singh installation nearly identical to this one.

One might dismiss this as art about art, but for Singh such involutions have everything to do with the exterior world. "Since culture is important", he argues, "couldn't our relationship to it be an interesting topic for a work? *The School for Objects Criticized*, for example, contains a little mockery of our desire to submit all the art we come across to an instant like or dislike judgement. It's also, equally importantly, a nod to the knowledge of theatre of Molière, specifically the French playwright's *The School for Wives* (1662) and the successor he wrote in response to negative reviews, *The Critique of the School for Wives* (1663). To let historically aware audiences, Singh may appear to adopt an exemplary postmodern relation to the artwork, but in fact his reference points – from Aristophanes's choruses 'breaking the third wall' by addressing the audience to Molière's co-opting of critique, from Oscar Wilde's dialogues on art function to the parodies of Woody Allen – make it clear that cultural reflexivity is as old as the hills.



'SINCE CULTURE IS SO  
IMPORTANT, COULDN'T  
OUR RELATIONSHIP  
TO IT BE AN INTERESTING  
TOPIC FOR A WORK?'





This page – Alexandre Singh, *Assembly Instructions*  
(Manzoni, Klein, *Colour Theory and Statuary*), (detail), 2008.  
Courtesy: the artist and Monitor gallery, Rome.

Opposite – Alexandre Singh, *The Marque of the Third Stripe*, 2008.  
Courtesy: the artist and Monitor gallery, Rome.



## ARTIST AS CIRCUMLOCUTOR

BY LUIGI FASSI



**A storyteller, an 18th-century-like novelist, and a performer, Alexandre Singh's work encompasses a range of diverse and multifaceted practices, all of them embedded in a fascinating cross-cultural incursion throughout Western literary myths, traditions and genres. Our fetishistic relationship to commercial brands and commodities is explored by Singh in its closeness to superstitious beliefs and Gothic horror tales, demolishing modernist certainties and established geopolitical scenarios. The Pope is now based in Memphis, Tennessee.**

*Luigi Fassi:* I just finished re-reading *The Marque of the Third Stripe*. What drove you to create an intricate Gothic narrative out of the life of Adolf Dassler, the founder of Adidas? In *The Marque of the Third Stripe* you depict him as a man struggling to preserve his mental safety, surrounded by an increasingly fantastic and uncanny environment. It seems like a mimicry of the classic Gothic genre, mastered by authors such as Lovecraft, Poe and Monk Lewis.

*Alexandre Singh:* The desire to build a body of work around Adidas came out of my own intensely personal relationship to the brand. They are the only shoes that I wear – absolutely no others. I was interested in reinvigorating what I find to be a quite stale, even orthodox tradition of “pop art”, taking it outside of reproductions of marketing materials and packaging, and instead focusing it on our highly personal relationships to these companies and the objects that they fashion.

This relationship is, at its apogee, utterly fetishistic (in the anthropological sense). And it seemed natural to try and collapse back together this modern Marxist conception of a commodity fetish object with our more 18th-century idea of the frightening fetish object, the primitive statuette, fashioned as an aid in rituals whose ancient provenance brings to mind magic, curses, and a terror of the unknown. The natural genre to work within therefore was obviously that of Gothic horror. As a convention it opened up a lot of interesting avenues. The most intriguing of these for me was the role of the narrator. He is already in that period of literature a problematic figure; a circumlocutor, a teller of tall tales (see Laurence Sterne et al.) and in the Gothic genre we have the added bonus of having all these tales within tales. Like a Russian doll, each narrator passes the baton of the storyteller on to another narrator, or manuscript, or found object, confusing the issue even further.

Quite often in a novel like Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, readers find themselves quite confused, forgetting after a while exactly whose story-within-a-story they are listening to. It seemed possible to apply a sculptural formal manipulation to the narrative structure of the text I was writing. In *The Marque of the Third Stripe* therefore, we never resurface into the original story, we never come up to the surface for air: every narrator keeps passing his baton down and down, each story embedded within the next one, forever and ever and ever.

*Lf:* In that work, everything is reverse: Europe is the newly discovered continent, inhabited by savages and Indians, while America is the Old Continent, decent and civilized; accordingly, the Pope is based in Memphis, modernism and modernist aesthetics are presented as antediluvian and disagreeable, and geometrical abstraction as an aberration of tribesmen. It seems like one of the main threads going through the tale is the attempt to mock the canons of modernism and its master narrative, making them collapse into obsolescence and absurdity.

*AS:* Aren't they already obsolete and absurd? I guess opinion is divided but... I'd like to think so. What was interesting about the modernist axiom was its paradoxical balance between a quasi-religious contemplation of the work of art and the simultaneous acknowledgment of its simple materiality, its actualness. In the universe of the story, the European primitives unabashedly worship the Gnostic Demiurge. They find in this actual materiality of geometrical objects a sublime present which is contrasted with the immaterial timeless spirituality of the Church. Within the tale this reversal seems to make a lot of sense; the non-pictorial work of art being so much about presence (rather than an imagina-

tive projection), becoming symbolic of our unbreakable bond with the physical manifestation of reality.

*Lf:* Your work is all about language, narrative and evocation. Recently you performed at Renwick in New York, holding a fascinating lecture on dreams and imagination. That night, for a moment, I had the feeling you were like Mercurio telling about Queen Mab...

*AS:* I like that. It's a really good analogy, not only with regards to that particular lecture but also to Mercurio's character in general. I think he and I both share a healthy cynicism and a love of bad puns. Within that speech, Mercurio's wryness conjures up such a wonderfully complex picture of absurdity that we almost wish it to be true. I really like that mechanism. For example, I'm making a work about superstition; extrapolating into absurdity the logical consequences of the notion of 'touching wood' when making an assertion about the future. I have questions about the percentage of pulp that constitutes true wood, how much contact is necessary (can one be wearing a glove?) and who will be the arbiter of such a law? Are there courts of "touching wood" – or for the opening an umbrella inside a building? Who says I broke a mirror? It was Plexiglas, and either way, it's more of a crack than a break...

*Lf:* It seems in that performance you were enacting the same logic that informs *Assembly Instructions*, a constellation of photocopies of books and pictures taken from the most diverse sources and connected together in visual diagrams to generate imaginary cause-and-effect systems. I especially like the Ikea part of *Assembly Instructions*, with its absurd mimicry of Giordano Bruno's *ars reminiscendi* staged in Ikea retail stores.

*AS:* I describe this thought pattern as “tangential logic”. In the systems of collages presented in the *Assembly Instructions*, as in the performances, I meander through ideas and suppositions that digress quickly from their departure point; sometimes they meet back up with a previously discarded sequence of ideas and flow off in another direction. Sometimes they just run into dead ends. I guess I could also call them academic daydreams.

That work about Ikea came from my endless visits to different Ikea stores. I am always struck by how each one is uncannily like the rest; the layouts, the products, everything almost always the same. The only clue as to where you are comes from the tell-tale dollar sign, euro or yen in front of the price. And so walking about in my own Ikea daydreams, I started thinking about Renaissance mnemonics, and the practice of constructing memory palaces in the mind, populating them with objects whose imagery would help the acolyte remember vast quantities of information. An Ikea store would be perfect for something like that, and of course they're everywhere, each one almost exactly the same as the next.

However they're always in flux, displays are constantly being revamped, new products appear, old ones are retired. The mammoth system of knowledge that you'd build up would undergo continuous corruption. Old knowledge would disappear, replaced by new knowledge in seasonal displays, items on sale and featured products. The *Assembly Instructions* might be a good metaphor for that. In its own way, it's a corrupt system of knowledge. Slides appear and disappear, each performance of the material always different, always mutating.

*Lf:* You told me you're aiming to write a proper movie script and all that you have achieved up to now is part of a self-learning process headed toward that goal. In this regard, I have the feeling that content and narrative in your

work, to a certain extent, are more an excuse for experimenting with language rather than what it is really at stake. Is that true?

AS: Well, aren't we always trying to learn something with each project we undertake? I'm still quite a mediocre writer, but I have ambitions to do better. These experiments or restrictions that I create are helpful for a beginner. Genre stops you from straying too far into places you don't have the skills to deal with yet. That's not to say that I'm not invested in these works. The one that I'm writing at the moment, *The Antecinema*, is a full-length Hollywood film script. I wanted to learn how to write a film without having to worry about whether I could ever film it. So what I'm working on is a massive big-budget Cold War epic that no studio would touch with a ten-foot bargepole. The text will eventually form the kernel of a performative installation, the first incarnation of which will be shown in New York for the Performa Biennial in November, 2009.

Whilst I'm playing with the verbal and textual, manipulating it or including it within frameworks of contemporary visual art, I'm not beholden to it. Quite often the work straddles genres, but if there is ever a choice: is this threatening to become simply theatre, or a conventional film? I would never insist that it remains visual art. The story is more important than any formal conceits or trickery. I don't care that it might become problematic as art – as long as it's rippin' good yarn. But yes, it's all part of a plan, and it's something I'm conscious of not only in my writing but in all the work that I'm making; that each work is a stepping stone to the next work, and to the next, each one more ambitious and more challenging to bring into being.



DI LUIGI FASSI

**Narratore, romanziere "settecentesco" e performer, Alexandre Singh attiva, nel suo lavoro, una molteplicità di strategie, invariabilmente implicate in un'affascinante incursione nei miti letterari, nelle tradizioni e nei generi narrativi propri dei canoni occidentali. Il nostro rapporto feticista con i marchi e i prodotti commerciali viene studiato da Singh nella sua somiglianza alle superstizioni e vicinanza all'atmosfera dei racconti gothic-horror, sino a far crollare certezze moderniste e scenari geopolitici consolidati. Il Papa, adesso, abita a Memphis, in Tennessee.**

Luigi Fassi: Ho appena finito di rileggere *The Marque of the Third Stripe*. Che cosa ti ha spinto a costruire un'intricatissima storia gotica sulla vita di Adolf Dassler, il fondatore di Adidas? In quest'opera lo dipingi come un uomo impegnato a lottare per salvaguardare la sua salute mentale, circondato da un ambiente sempre più misterioso e irrazionale. Sembra una sorta di parodia del genere gotico classico, quello esaltato da maestri come H. P. Lovecraft, E. A. Poe e Monk Lewis.

Alexandre Singh: Il desiderio di creare un intero lavoro su Adidas è sorto dal mio intenso rapporto personale con questo marchio. Sono le sole scarpe che indosso, senza eccezione. M'interessava dare nuova freschezza alla tradizione ormai antiquata della pop art, portando l'attenzione dalla riproduzione dei materiali e del packaging verso la nostra relazione individuale con queste aziende e i prodotti che creano. Credo sia una relazione del tutto feticista (in senso antropologico). Mi è sembrato naturale cercare di accostare questa concezione moderna, e marxista, dell'oggetto commerciale, con un'idea più antica, settecentesca, dell'oggetto come feticcio inquietante. Penso alla statuetta primitiva, realizzata come strumento rituale, che fa venire in mente il magico, la maledizione e il terrore per l'ignoto. Il genere più adatto per lavorare su questo terreno era quello del *gothic horror*. Come forma letteraria, ha aperto una quantità di strade molto fertili. La più interessante per me è quella legata al ruolo del narratore. Nella letteratura settecentesca il narratore era già diventato una figura problematica; un *circumlocutor*, un cantore di storie assurde e improbabili (pensa a Lawrence Sterne e altri).

Nel genere gotico a tutto ciò si aggiunge il fatto di avere storie intrecciate dentro le storie. Come nelle matriske, i narratori si susseguono l'uno all'altro, lasciando magari voce a un manoscritto o a un oggetto trovato, confondendo ulteriormente la vicenda. Molto spesso, in romanzi come *Melmoth l'errante* di Charles Robert Maturin, il lettore si trova, dopo un po', completamente spaesato, dimentico di quale "storia dentro la storia" stia seguendo le tracce. Mi è sembrato possibile applicare una manipolazione formale di questo tipo, quasi scultorea direi, alla struttura narrativa del testo che stavo scrivendo. In *The Marque of the Third Stripe* non si ritorna mai sui passi della storia originale, non si riemerge mai alla superficie iniziale: ogni narratore continua a passare il testimone a quello seguente; ciascuna storia s'incestra in un'altra, all'infinito.

LF: In quest'opera, tutto è capovolto. L'Europa è il nuovo continente, popolato da selvaggi e da Indiani, mentre l'America è il vecchio continente, civile ed evoluto. Di conseguenza, il Papa è di stanza a Memphis, il Modernismo e l'estetica modernista sono presentati come antediluviani e sgradevoli e l'astrazione geometrica come un'aberrazione venerata da uomini tribali. Sembra che una delle costanti che attraversano il racconto sia il tentativo di mettere in ridicolo la tradizione e i canoni del Modernismo, facendoli collassare nell'obsolescenza e nell'assurdità più totale.



AS: Ma non credi che siano già assurdi e obsoleti? Immagino le opinioni siano divergenti a tal proposito, ma... a me piace pensare così. Ciò che era interessante nell'assioma del Modernismo era il suo particolare equilibrio tra una contemplazione di tipo quasi religioso dell'opera d'arte e, al tempo stesso, il riconoscimento della sua materialità elementare, della sua attualità. Nel contesto della mia storia, i primitivi europei adorano, senza dubbio alcuno, il Demiurgo gnostico dell'arte modernista. Nella materialità concreta delle opere d'arte geometriche, essi riescono ad esperire l'intensità di un presente sublime, completamente diverso dalla spiritualità trascendente e senza tempo della Chiesa. Nel racconto, questo capovolgimento è determinante; l'opera d'arte non pittorica, tutta racchiusa e concentrata sulla sua stretta presenzialità fisica (piuttosto che su una proiezione immaginativa), diviene un simbolo del nostro legame inscindibile con l'espressione più materiale della realtà.

LJ: Tutto il tuo lavoro è incentrato sul linguaggio, sulla narrazione e sull'evocazione. Recentemente hai messo in scena un'affascinante performance da Renwick a New York, in forma di una *lecture* sul tema del sogno e dell'immaginazione. Quella sera, per un attimo, mi è sembrato tu fossi diventato Mercurio, intento ad ammalare raccontando della Regina Mab...

AS: Mi piace! È veramente una buona analogia, non solo riguardo a quella specifica performance, ma in generale riguardo al personaggio di Mercurio. Credo che condividiamo entrambi, Mercurio ed io, un salutare cinismo e una grande passione per i giochi di parole. Nel suo celebre discorso, l'obliquità dell'ironia di Mercurio genera l'evocazione di una tale *congerie* di meravigliose assurdità, al punto da farci davvero desiderare che possa essere tutto vero. Amo tantissimo questo meccanismo. Ad esempio, sto lavorando, in questo momento, a un'opera sulla superstizione, cercando di far collassare sino all'assurdo le conseguenze logiche della credenza di "toccare legno" quando si parla di un'anticipazione del futuro. Così pongo una quantità di interrogativi sulla percentuale di polpa che costituisce il vero legno, quanto contatto con esso sia necessario (la "toccata" è ancora valida se si indossa un guanto?) e su chi sarà mai l'arbitro di questa legge. Esistono forse tribunali del "toccar legno" atti a dirimere tali quesiti, o dediti a valutare le implicazioni dell'aprire ombrelli all'interno di un edificio? E ancora: chi ha mai detto che io abbia davvero rotto uno specchio? In realtà era di plexiglas e in ogni caso si trattava di una crepa piuttosto che di una frattura...

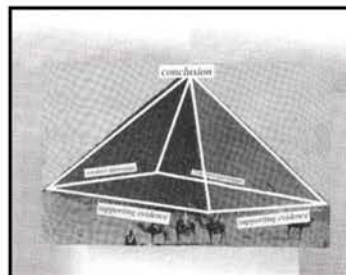
LJ: Mi sembra che in quella performance tu abbia messo in atto la stessa logica che si ritrova in *Assembly Instructions*, una costellazione di fotocopie di libri e immagini provenienti dalle fonti più diverse e connesse da diagrammi visivi per generare sistemi di causa-effetto del tutto immaginari. È molto efficace la parte sull'Ikea di *Assembly Instructions*, con la sua assurda parodia dell'*ars reminescenti* di Giordano Bruno messa in atto nei magazzini Ikea!

AS: In generale, definisco questo modello di pensiero come "logica tangenziale". Nei sistemi di collage presenti in *Assembly Instructions*, così come nelle performance, m'interessa vagabondare attraverso idee e supposizioni che si allontanano e deviano dal loro punto di partenza, per rincontrarsi, di tanto in tanto, con una sequenza di idee, precedentemente dismessa, sino a scorrer via di nuovo in altre direzioni. A volte, invece, finiscono semplicemente in pun-

ti morti senza ritorno. Credo si potrebbe chiamarli sogni ad occhi aperti di un accademico. La parte sull'Ikea è conseguenza delle mie infinite visite ai magazzini Ikea. Sono sempre sorpreso da come siano tutti incredibilmente uguali, dal posizionamento degli articoli e degli oggetti a ogni dettaglio, sempre tutto uguale! L'unico indizio per decifrare dove ci si trovi realmente, è dato dal simbolo della valuta di fronte alla cifra del costo dei prodotti, dollari, euro, yen o altro. Così, andando a zonzo nel mio sogno a occhi aperti dentro Ikea, ho iniziato a pensare alla mnemotecnica rinascimentale e alla strategia di costruire palazzi della memoria, popolandoli di oggetti la cui foggia e immagine aiuterà il discente a rammentare una vasta quantità di informazioni. Un magazzino Ikea sarebbe perfetto a tale scopo, tanto più che sono dappertutto, ciascuno quasi identico a tutti gli altri. Tuttavia sono strutture sempre in evoluzione, il posizionamento dei prodotti è costantemente risistemato, nuovi oggetti vengono immessi e altri eliminati. In tal modo, il gigantesco sistema di conoscenza e rammemorazione che uno potrebbe mettere in piedi, subirebbe continue cancellazioni e fratture. Conoscenze precedenti sparirebbero, rimpiazzate da nuovi saperi, in forma di allestimenti stagionali, articoli in vendita e prodotti in esposizione. *Assembly Instructions* potrebbe essere una buona metafora di tutto ciò. A suo modo è un sistema di conoscenza già guasto. Immagini e diapositive appaiono e scompaiono, rendendo ogni riproposizione del materiale sempre diversa e in continua mutazione.

LJ: Mi dicevi che aspiri a scrivere una vera sceneggiatura e che tutto ciò che hai fatto finora è parte di un processo di autoapprendimento teso a quel fine. Da questo punto di vista, mi sembra che i contenuti e i racconti che compongono il tuo lavoro siano, per certi aspetti, piuttosto una scusa per sperimentare con il linguaggio che non la parte centrale del tuo lavoro. È così?

AS: Beh, direi che tutti cerchiamo sempre di imparare qualcosa di nuovo da ciò che facciamo, no? Mi reputo uno scrittore ancora piuttosto mediocre, ma ho l'ambizione di migliorarmi. Questi esperimenti e limiti che creo sono molto utili per un principiante. Lavorare su un genere specifico ti impedisce di avventurarti troppo su terreni che ancora non hai la capacità di affrontare. Con questo non intendo dire che non abbia un interesse concreto nei lavori che ho realizzato. Ciò che sto scrivendo adesso, *The Antecinema*, è la sceneggiatura per un lungometraggio hollywoodiano. Il mio proposito è d'imparare a scrivere un intero film, senza preoccuparmi se potrà mai essere realizzato o meno. Così ciò che sto componendo è un colossale epico di guerra che nessun Studio prenderebbe mai ragionevolmente in considerazione. Il testo sarà il nocciolo di un'installazione performativa che verrà presentata come parte di Performa Biennial nel novembre del 2009. Mentre gioco con il linguaggio e gli aspetti verbali, manipolandoli o includendoli nell'ambito dell'arte visiva, non mi sento obbligato verso nessun genere. Spesso il mio lavoro sta a cavallo tra diversi generi, ma esiste sempre una scelta: tende a diventare semplicemente teatro, o invece cinema convenzionale? Non pretendo che rimanga arte visiva. La storia è più importante di ogni preoccupazione formale. Non m'interessa che il lavoro possa diventare problematico come "arte", ma che sviluppi una narrazione veramente convincente. Ma sono d'accordo, fa tutto parte di un piano, di una progettualità: sono ben consapevole che, tanto nella scrittura quanto nel percorso artistico, ogni opera funga da trampolino alla successiva, e ciascuna sia sempre più ambiziosa e impegnativa da realizzare.



Opposite, top - Alexandre Singh, *Assembly Instructions Lecture*, performance, Renwick Gallery, New York, 2009.

Opposite, down - Alexandre Singh, *The Marque of the Third Stripe*, installation and video, of this tale, I cannot guarantee a single word, Royal College of Art, London, 2008. Courtesy: the artist and Monitor, Rome.

This page - Alexandre Singh, *Assembly Instructions (Tangential Logic)*, (details), 2008. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco/New York.