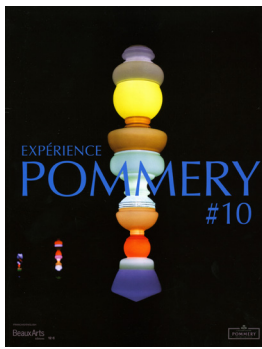


Lothar Hempel

Revue de presse
Press review



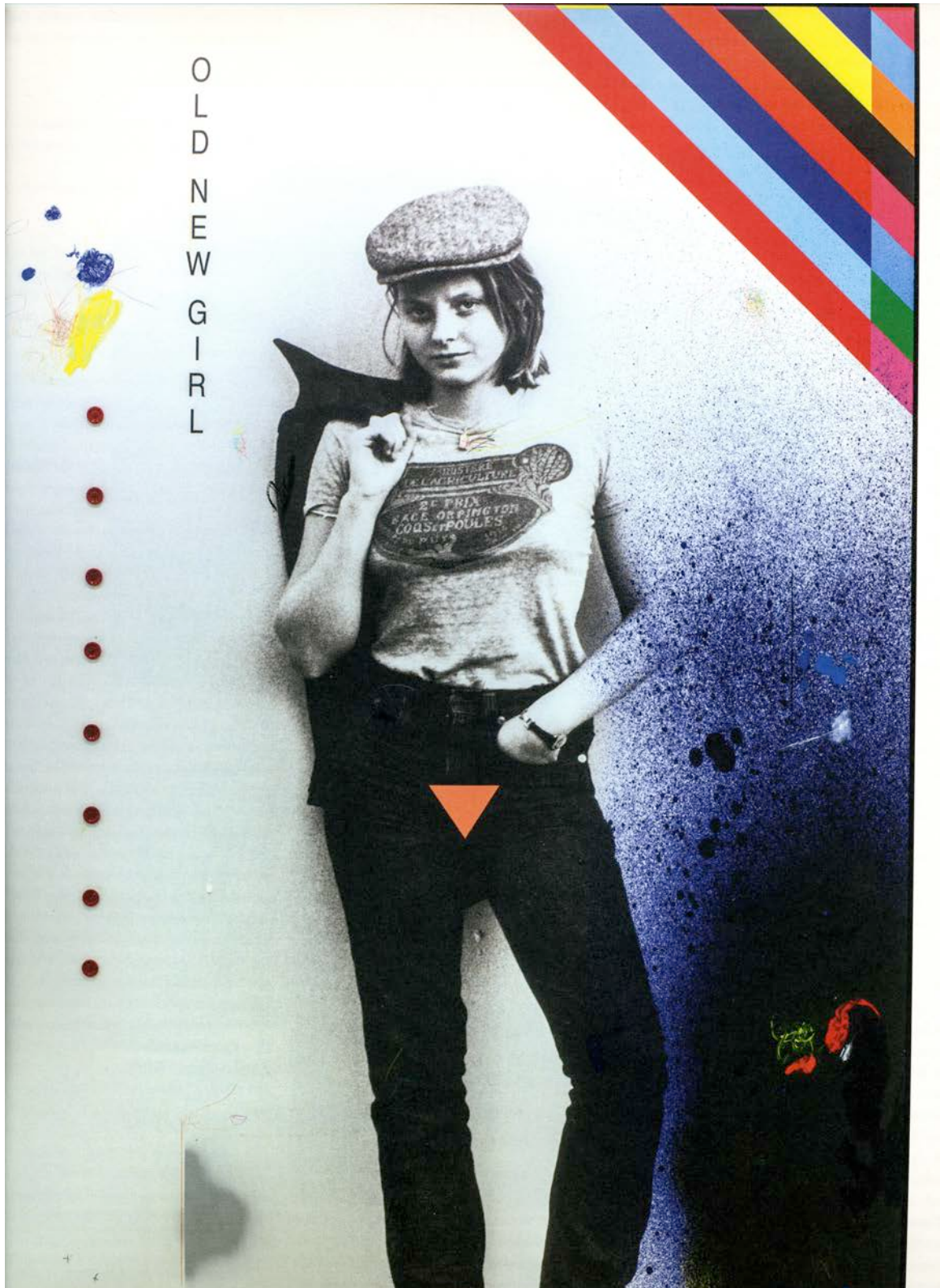
Lothar Hempel

OMEN, 2012

Crayère 15

Ayant recours à un grand nombre de médias, l'artiste allemand Lothar Hempel élabore des situations de nature à la fois sculpturale et théâtrale, qui intègrent le spectateur comme l'un des personnages d'une saynète improvisée. Lothar Hempel donne vie à des figures qui l'ont interpellé et qui évoquent en chacun de nous des histoires, des légendes ou des préoccupations éthiques et esthétiques. Il installe, sous le grand bas-relief, sculpté au XIX^e siècle, du *Champagne au XVIII^e siècle*, une sculpture peinte à la surface animée d'un néon: *OMEN (augure)*. Une jeune femme, dont on voit la figure deux fois, émerge des blocs de craie et semble pleurer, mais ses larmes ouvrent l'espace et forment des fenêtres. L'ensemble pourrait être l'entrée d'un mystérieux bar, une porte vers l'inconnu, à franchir. La figure énigmatique interroge et tente ainsi le spectateur, invité à reconsidérer le potentiel fictionnel du lieu.

German artist Lothar Hempel uses a large number of media to create sculptural and theatrical situations, casting the spectator as a character in an improvised playlet. Hempel gives life to figures that draw his attention and evoke histories, legends or ethical and aesthetic concerns in each of us. Under the large low-relief—sculpted in the 1800s—of champagne in the 1700s (*Champagne au XVIII^e siècle*) he has installed a painted sculpture illuminated by a neon light. A young woman, whose figure is seen twice, emerges from chalk blocks and appears to cry but her tears open up the space and form windows. The piece could be the entrance to a mysterious bar, a door to the unknown through which one could pass. This enigmatic figure thus questions and tempts the viewer, who is drawn into a reconsideration of the fictional potential of the site.



You think: "In the centre of this huge concrete area the artificial lake seems like an ice-cold eye." The line between concrete and water is so sharp that you can almost not look at it. You are waiting with your light grey pantsuit and your leather briefcase to be picked up. They let you wait, that was obvious. Probably they are observing you. This was also obvious. They wanted to see how you stand there and stay calm even though you know that one is letting you wait and observing you. Birds are sitting on electric cables. Insects pupate underneath your feet. Wild animals stick to creepers. The sun is above now and the shadows are gone. There is just light and space and time and tension everywhere and you smile, as if you had experienced this already a thousand times. "You lucky woman – you lived a thousand years!" someone is calling from the back (You know that voice. Who...?), but you don't turn around. Pretend, as if you haven't heard anything.

*
**

Rome, Via Monte Nero, July 15th. I coloured my hair white. I varnished my nails blue. I painted my lips black. I am wearing a green bra under my red blouse. I am sitting there, cross my legs and don't think of anything. The floor is covered in brown white carpet. A TV is on without sound. The walls are painted bright red. The apartment is simple but furnished with good taste. My hands are calm and I am smoking another cigarette. Slowly the room is shrinking, the windows are getting blind and the noise is fading. Then, the door opens. That's the sign. Slowly I get up and walk through. On the other side there is nothing but white light. My eyes hurt. Then I get used to the light. I see: colour fields and forms. Circles and contrasts. Geometry and emotion. Patterns and music. I think: "Now I'm in the movie. That's my movie!" My heart is beating wildly and I keep walking determinedly. Step by step, walking tall, proud and nonchalant, the way they taught me to. The way I trained my entire life. The way I want it.

*
**

You are standing in front of a silver wall made of paper and you are posing like a large naked doll. It is already late. The photographer is still not happy with the light and turns the spotlights again and again. His assistant is named Kumiko. She is exceptionally beautiful. Kumiko: "I have only been in this city for two months and sometimes I feel very lonely." "Yes!" you say. And again: "Yes!" Slowly you shift your weight from the left leg to the right, you feel your breasts, you feel your eyes, you feel your hair. All of a sudden your gaze falls into the camera as if it were falling into a dried out well. Perfect black. "Down there, I could be happy!", is what you are thinking. "I would wait in that depth, without moving, mellow like a diamond. My thoughts would slow down. Then they would freeze entirely. My soul would become as clear as ice, my breath would crystallize. And once the transformation is finished (1000 years later!), I will raise upwards, out of the dark, up towards the light and I will redeem you and the entire world!"

*
**

She has been wandering around this ghost city for months now, walking in circles again and again walking through the same doors. She does not give up but it doesn't look good (I will never find the way out of here!). She bumps her head or stumbles over roots that grow through the stoney ground. The walls are sticky and the smell of rotten fruit goes through the skin. "The heat makes me sick. If I could only focus," she thinks and then she thinks of something else. Now she has the impression that she hears chimes, just around the corner, but there are only palm trees, insects and trash. Then she talks to her dead father. Then she talks to a salamander. Then she talks to the sun (Please, help me!). Behind her, about ten meters away her other self is standing. Clean and neat. Utter, clear, oriented. Like an exclamation mark. Like a compass needle. Like a star sign. One self thinks about the other self: "Keep going, sister, don't give up, don't cease. You are very close to the exit!"

*
**

Seventh day: finally success! We have been working for this for such a long time. We have been working so hard for this. The audience is applauding, satisfied but also tired. Everybody wants only to get home quickly. The closing credits are shown – black and white graphics from the computer. The TV studio is emptying. The set is packed up and transported away. Removing the makeup and getting changed. Traffic on the way home. The empty apartment. A glimpse into the mirror, going to bed quickly. My dream: I am laying down on a white platform naked, sticking to it like a thing. To my right there is a dull black stone. To my left, draped over a desk chair, a red fur. Behind me on the platform there is a shop window made of bronze. Next to it, a bit more in the back, a helix made of white neon. I try to get an overview, lifting my head, but I don't see anything. All of a sudden a white elegant hand comes out of the background and gives us a new order. But it seems not to be right and we are arranged again. The stones to the back, me to the left, the fur to the front. But like that it is wrong as well. And another combination is tried out. And another one. Unsuccessfully. And then we are circling around from one position to the next, faster and faster, without stopping until one cannot distinguish us anymore and we are finally melted together. It was then that one lost interest in us. All at once we become indifferent, literally annoying and one wants to forget us quickly. The game is over. "Finally free!" says the stone and becomes a stone again. "Finally silence!" says the helix and becomes light again. "Finally me!" I say and I wake up.

*
**





Lothar Hempel „Endlose Reise“, 2006,
verschiedene Materialien, 410 x 220 x 180 cm

Liebe Leserinnen, liebe Leser,

der Kunstfrachter mit dem Namen Berlin, den viele für einen Partydampfer halten, befindet sich auf dem Weg in unbekannte Gewässer. Wo wird er ankern? Die Kunsthalle ist weg, das Schloss eher Schneegestöber, die Kulturpolitik kaum sichtbar, aber immerhin siedelt wieder mehr zeitgenössische Kunst von Rang in den Museen. Sicher ist nur eins: Stürmischer geht's in keiner anderen Kunstmetropole zu – in Deutschland ohnehin nicht. Und eingeschifft haben sich alle, die hier arbeiten und leben: Hunderte von Galeristen, Tausende von Künstlern sowie Enthusiasten und Beobachter. Während die einen noch lamentieren, haben andere längst das Ruder in die Hand genommen. Einige dieser Bewegungen, die die Stadt teilweise bereits seit den Jahren vor der Wende bereichern und auch verändern, porträtieren wir in unserem Berlin-Spezial (ab Seite 41).

Einen Anlass braucht das Thema Kunsthauptstadt eigentlich nicht: Es ist ein Dauerbrenner. Dennoch: 20 Jahre nach dem Startsignal zum „langen Weg



nach Mitte“ (Diedrich Diederichsen) ist es Zeit für eine umfassende Bilanz. Nur dies vorab: Es leben großartige Künstler, Schriftsteller, Architekten, Kuratoren oder Galeristen in der Stadt. Komme da, was wolle: Die sind da. Und machen weiter. Und wir zeigen, was sie machen. Zum Beispiel die großartige Bilderserie „Kapitalistischer Realismus“ von Rainald Goetz (ab Seite 35). Der feilte mit Artdirector Hans Löffler in der Redaktion an allen Facetten seiner Geschichte – genauso wie Wolfgang Tillmans, der ja eigentlich in London lebt, aber auch in Berlin arbeitet. Neue, noch nie gezeigte Fotografien des Künstlers finden Sie ab Seite 62. Wir meinen: Viel besser wird's nicht. Viel Spaß beim Lesen und Schauen wünscht Ihr

Holger Liebs
Chefredakteur

P.S.: Qualität und Relevanz von Monopol suchen unter den Kunstmagazinen ihresgleichen. Wir wollen, dass das auch in Zukunft so bleibt. Darum erhöht sich jetzt nach mehr als fünf Jahren Stabilität der Verkaufspreis: auf 8,50 Euro im Einzelverkauf und 7,50 Euro im Abonnement. Wir bitten um Verständnis.

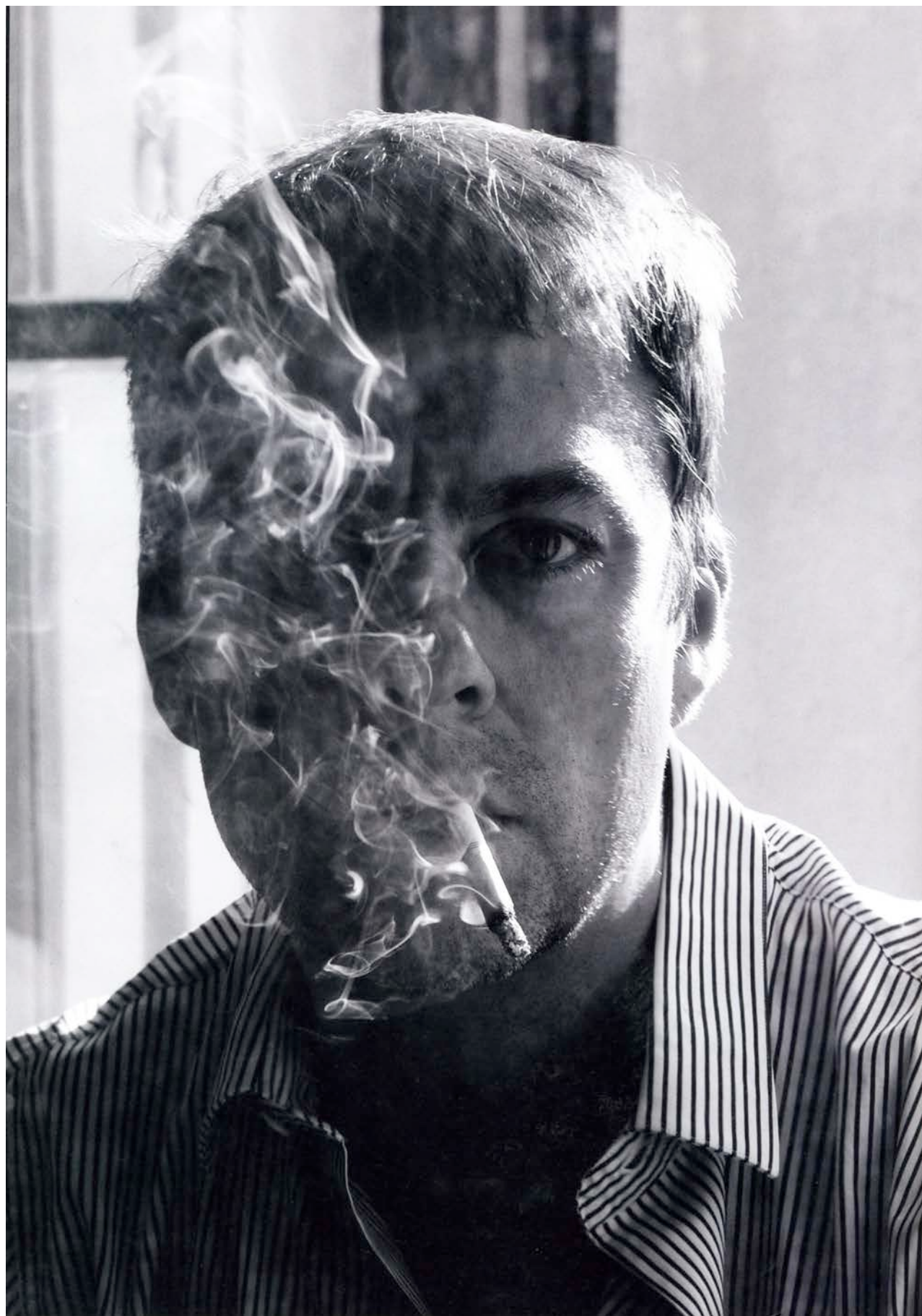
PORTRÄT

Aliens im Wunderland

Wer die Zeit einfrieren, Popstars in Außerirdische verwandeln und die Zuschauer in die Kulissen seines Bildertheaters beamen kann – der muss ein Zauber-künstler sein. Wie der Neuberliner **Lothar Hempel**

TEXT ELKE BUHR PORTRÄT KIRA BUNSE





W

äre Lothar Hempels Kunst Literatur, dann „Alice hinter den Spiegeln“ von Lewis Carroll. Die kleine Alice hätte jedenfalls genau gewusst, was zu tun ist, wenn sie durch irgendeinen Zufall in Hempels Ausstellung „Cafe Kaputt“ gerät.

Vergangen Herbst fand die Schau in seiner Mailänder Galerie Gio Marconi statt. Dort standen die Besucher gleich zu Anfang vor dem Bild einer Jackie-Kennedy-Schönheit,

Müde Götter mit grünen Filzgesichtern und seltsamen Rüstungen heben ihre Arme und kündigen den „Kampf bis zum Ende“ an, gegen wen auch immer. Und nachdenkliche Frauen, einer Maxim-Gorki-Inszenierung aus den 50er-Jahren entsprungen, lagern vor Kulissen und blicken in eine längst vergangene revolutionäre Zukunft.

Nur: Wo bei Alice hinter den Spiegeln rasende Aktivität herrschen würde, Züge fahren und Schachköniginnen rennen würden, bleibt in Hempels Kunst alles still, gefroren im Moment. Eine in Bernstein gegessene



Lothar Hempel lässt sich nicht einsortieren. Sein Werk steht in der deutschen Gegenwartskunst herum wie ein eigenwilliger Monolith. Oder vielmehr wie ein ganzer Haufen Monolithen, denn auch ein Hempel muss einem Hempel nicht unbedingt gleichen

„ABC“, 2006, verschiedene Materialien, circa 320 x 560 cm

von deren Augen eines durchdringend brannte, denn es war aus einer Glühbirne gemacht. Neben der Frau lag ein umgestürzter Barhocker – wer weiß, wer ihn da liegen gelassen hatte –, vor ihrer Brust lehnte ein rechteckiger Spiegel. Und der lud ganz offenbar zur bewährten Alice-Technik ein: Man starrt ihn an, bis das eigene Bild auf der glatten Oberfläche plötzlich neblig wird, und schon schlüpft man hindurch.

Die Welt, die einen hinter Hempels Spiegel erwartet, ist fantastisch: Venusfiguren gehen spazieren, die keine Köpfe und keine Arme haben, dafür aber Sonnenschirme.

Welt, in der der Betrachter ganz in Ruhe herumspazieren kann – und im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes hinter die Kulissen schauen. Alles liegt offen, das Sperrholz, auf dem die Bilder aufgezogen sind, die Kabel für die Glühbirne, die Rückseite der Illusion.

Womit ein entscheidender Punkt genannt wäre, der Hempels Kunst Alice' Herrschaft wieder entreißt. Denn so ungehemmt sein Werk auch im Surrealistischen schwebt, es erschöpft sich nicht im Märchenhaften. Jede von Hempels Ausstellungen ist gleichzeitig ein Wunderland und eine Lektion darüber, wie Bilder eigentlich entstehen: im Raum,

im Zusammenspiel von Objekt, Perspektive, Gängen und Blicken. „Mein Thema heißt ‚Verbindung zwischen Innen und Außen‘. Es geht um Schwellen, um Veränderungen, Metamorphosen“, sagt Hempel beim Gespräch in seiner großen Altbauwohnung. Dabei wirkt er durchaus nicht so, als wollte er gleich pilzeknabbernd mit weißen Kaninchen reden.

Seit zweieinhalb Jahren lebt Lothar Hempel in Berlin, das gehe ja auch kaum anders, wer Kunst mache, müsse hier sein. Der Rheinländer lässt sich deutlich am Zungenschlag erkennen. Seine auffällige Verbindung zwischen metaphysischer Sensibilität und Bodenständigkeit – wäre es zu viel der regionalistischen Kaffeesatzleserei, sie seiner Herkunft zuzuschreiben?

1966 in Köln geboren, hat er immer in der Altstadt gelebt, „nie mehr als einen Kilometer vom Dom entfernt“. So ist der Katholizismus ein ernsthafter Verdächtiger bei der Suche nach dem Ursprung von Hempels Lust am prallen Bild. Aber nicht der einzige: Mit 14 entdeckt er die Galerieszene der Stadt für sich, „Kippenberger, Oehlen, die waren wie Popstars damals, echte *role models*“. Ende der 80er-Jahre geht er an die Düsseldorfer Akademie, studiert bei Fritz Schwegler, dem vom Fluxus inspirierten Grenzgänger zwischen Bildhauerei, Musik und Aktionskunst. Lothar Hempel malt, filmt, performt. Und macht Mitte der 90er den entscheidenden Schritt zu dem, was heute seine Arbeit ausmacht: Er stellt das zweidimensionale Bild in den Raum und schafft die ersten kullissenartigen Installationen.

In seiner New Yorker Galerie Anton Kern (der internationale Erfolg kommt früh) zeigt Hempel 1996 Stellwände mit extrem detailreichen Zeichnungen, von Textfragmenten begleitet und mit sprechenden Titeln, die das Kino im Kopf gleich aktivieren: „Eine blasse Kolonie“, in der verloren einige Gestalten zwischen hohen Wänden stehen wie in einem Film noir; oder „Zuckersumpf“, ein Ensemble von Fassaden und Gesichtern, bereits von Lampen beleuchtet im Stil eines Filmsets.

„Von vorn gibt es Standpunkte, aus denen man die verschiedenen Wände als komplette Bilder sieht. Wenn man sich bewegt, sieht man dagegen die Schnittstellen oder die Stellwände von hinten – all das gehört zum Werk. Entscheidend ist, dass der Betrachter



„Ich will, dass die Farben opak sind, dass es scharfe Grenzen gibt, keine Verläufe“, sagt Hempel. „Die Bilder sollen so klar sein, dass man sie wie Schrift lesen kann.“ Als Sprachsystem funktionieren auch seine Ausstellungen, in denen sich die Objekte einfinden wie in einem Theaterstück, gehalten von versteckten Magnetismen

in eine neue Rolle kommt: Er selbst wählt die Perspektive, setzt das Bild für sich zusammen, er zirkuliert durch die Installation.“

Hempel durchforstet das kollektive Bildgedächtnis von Medien, Theater, Film und Popkultur nach Figuren, zeichnet sie und macht sie zu Akteuren seiner Landschaften. Eine Demonstrantin mit lasziv geschlossenen Augen wird in „Nur das Lächeln bleibt“ zum irritierenden Denkmal für den Zusammenhang von Politik und körperlicher Hingabe. Irgendwann entdeckt er, dass er Fotografien auch direkt in die angedeuteten Architekturen hineinstellen kann. Tänzerinnen und Schauspieler tauchen wie schockgefroren und durch die Zeiten gebeamt in seinen Installationen auf. Sie treffen auf schwarze Krähen oder versammeln sich zur Fahrt im Ruderboot. Bilderrätsel, die nicht nach einer Lösung schreien und auch nicht nach der Kunstgeschichte. Wenn Hempel ein Fahrrad auf einen Sockel stellt, dann hat er es dort hingeträumt, nicht von Duchamp geliehen.

Zu Beginn der Nuller-Jahre verschwinden die feinen Zeichnungen von den Oberflächen der Kulissen, der romantisierende Strich macht starkfarbiger Klarheit Platz. Mal knallt die Geometrie in Gestalt einer Kachelwand mit harten Linien hinein wie in „Hindenburg Platz“ von 2001, mal als konstruktivistischer Kubus („Maschinen Herz“, 2002).

Spätestens hier wird klar: Traumlandschaften hin oder her – wäre Lothar Hempels Kunst Musik, klänge sie nicht nach psychedelischem Retro-Rock, sondern elektronisch, seriell und reduziert. „Techno war mein zweiter Punk, und wenn mich zuletzt etwas in Köln gehalten hat, dann Minimal, die Szene rund um das Label Kompakt“, sagt er. Wolfgang Voigt gehörte dazu, einer, der abstrakte Töne gern mit mythischen Begriffen auflädt, einen Plattenzyklus „Gas“ nannte und dazu in die Bedeutungsschichten des deutschen Walds hinabstieg.

Hempel hat selbst den einen oder anderen Track veröffentlicht oder für Installationen verwendet. Trotzdem macht er keine Clubkunst, und die Götter mit den Filz-



„Just come!“, 2009, Acryl auf Aluminium, 100 x 45 cm.

Links: „Bacca Paranoika“, 2009, verschiedene Materialien, 240 x 100 x 100 cm

gesichert, die er seit einigen Jahren aus Schaufensterpuppen herstellt, tragen keine Raveruniform. Der Mann lässt sich weder einsortieren noch eingemeinden. Sein Werk steht in der deutschen Gegenwartskunst herum wie ein eigenwilliger Monolith. Oder vielmehr wie ein ganzer Haufen Monolithen, denn auch ein Hempel muss einem Hempel nicht unbedingt gleichen.

So sticht seine so schlichte wie rätselhafte Serie verfremdeter Medienvorlagen heraus, aus denen Joy-Division-Sänger Ian Curtis oder Christiane F. uns anblicken wie Aliens. Hempel nutzt hier klassische Strategien der Appropriation-Art – und lädt das aneignende Zitat gleichzeitig mit Geschichte auf: Die berühmte „Stern“-Ausgabe, deren Cover er zu seinem Christiane-F.-Werk verarbeitet, ist seit Erscheinen in seinem Besitz, längst abgegriffen, zerknittert, trägt die Spuren der intensiven Auseinandersetzung.

Seit 2004 führen seine Recherchen in den Bildarchiven auch zu Computercollagen, die er als „Diamanten“ in auf der Spitze balancierenden Rahmen präsentiert. Wer diese Arbeiten mit den Filzgöttern vergleicht oder den surrealistischen Skulpturen, kommt kaum auf die Idee, das Werk desselben Künstlers vor sich zu haben. Das ist die Freiheit, die Lothar Hempel sich nimmt: Erst zum Set arrangiert, zur imaginären Filmkulisse, entwickeln seine Bilder, Objekte, Gestalten wieder ihren Zusammenhang, der womöglich nur ein gemeinsamer Denkhorizont ist.

Direkte Vorbilder finden sich nicht in der Vita. „Künstler, die ich schätze, machen meist etwas ganz anderes als ich“, sagt Hempel. Den Weg in renommierte Galerien und wichtige Sammlungen, zum Beispiel die von Rosa und Carlos de la Cruz in Miami, hat er allein gemacht. Nur der Surrealismus bleibt als Pate, den Hempel gelegentlich als gespielten Witz inszeniert, etwa wenn er Damen mit Katzenköpfen Rad fahren lässt. Und André Bretons Methode des *cadavre exquis*, bei der man gemeinsam an einer Figur zeichnet, ohne die Teile der anderen sehen zu können, stand Modell für eine Serie von Figuren, die er seit einigen Jahren auf Aluminium malt.

Zusammengestückelt sollen sie wirken, wie Marionetten, aus harten Flächen kom-

Hempels Recherchen führen auch zu Computercollagen, die er in auf der Spitze balancierenden Rahmen präsentiert. Oder zu der so schlichten wie rätselhaften Serie verfremdeter ikonischer Medienvorlagen, von denen Ian Curtis von Joy Division und Christiane F. uns anblicken wie Aliens



„New Dawn Fades“, 2003–2006, C-Print auf Aluminium, gerahmt, 200 x 120 cm. Oben: „Plakat (Magica)“, 2009, C-Print auf Aluminium, 258 x 258 cm

biniert. Stets sind sie im Profil zu sehen.

„Sie sind Performer, man schaut auf sie, als stünde man seitlich in der Kulisse, während sie ihrem Publikum Auge in Auge gegenüberstehen.“ Hempel zeigt sie in dem Moment, in dem sie zu Rollen werden. Dass nicht klar wird, in welchem Stück, gehört zum Spiel.

An der Ästhetik seiner eigenwilligen Geschöpfe hat er lange getüftelt. „Ich will, dass die Farben opak sind, dass es scharfe Grenzen gibt, keine Verläufe. Die Bilder sollen so klar sein, dass man sie wie Schrift lesen kann.“ Als Sprachsystem funktionieren auch seine Ausstellungen als Ganzes, in denen sich die Objekte einfinden wie in einem Theaterstück, gehalten von versteckten Magnetismen.

Mehr und mehr nähern sich seine Ausstellungen dem Gesamtkunstwerk. Kaum jemand kann Räume so beredt bespielen, die Figuren scheinen so deutlich miteinander zu kommunizieren, dass man mit angehaltenem Atem auf die Erzählung wartet, die jeden Moment einsetzen muss. Nur wird der Text der Geschichte nie klar zutage treten. Wie bei „Alice hinter den Spiegeln“: Dort wirkt jedes geschriebene Wort verdreht und verschweigt seinen Sinn.

Die Seele der Dinge, sagt Hempel noch, liege eben nicht in ihnen, sondern in den Zwischenräumen. „Das Ding an sich ist banal, entscheidend sind die Übergänge, die Aggregatzustände.“ Auch seine Existenz als Künstler sei vielleicht nur eine Phase. So bringt einen der Trip in die Fantasiewelten des Lothar Hempel zu sehr zeitgenössischen philosophischen Konzepten: statt Essenzialismen ein Denken in Prozessen und Relationen.

Oder sind wir doch zurück beim Kölner Techno? Wo nichts sich verfestigt, während der Beat tuckert? In einer Installation ließ Lothar Hempel einmal über Wochen eine Kanne Kaffee so lange auf der Wärmeplatte stehen, bis das Gebräu verkrustete und der Geruch den Galerieraum füllte. Die Ausstellung hieß „Propaganda“, und die Metapher dürfte klar sein. Beweglich, ruhig auch: ein Rätsel bleiben. Bloß nicht vor dem Spiegel sitzen und den Weg hindurch nicht finden.

Lothar Hempel wird unter anderem vertreten von Anton Kern, New York, C/O Gerhardsen Gerner, Berlin, und Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London



Le Magasin, Grenoble, France

A retrospective can be a classic way of making sense out of something seemingly senseless. Without a doubt the mid-career retrospective of Cologne-based artist Lothar Hempel at Le Magasin, entitled 'Alphabet City', fell into this category. Over the last decade Hempel has managed to establish a flexible discourse, following his outspoken rejection of 'rationalism and logic'. As a result his work faced the challenge of conceptual ambiguity, making it easy to be overlooked by history's critical canon. A substantial survey of his oeuvre is therefore a timely way to acknowledge that, in retrospect, everything is done for a purpose.

With 'Alphabet City' failure is turned into an accomplishment. The miscommunication of

clear-cut ideas appears to be the main objective, demonstrating how Hempel's artistic production masks its conceptual point of departure instead of communicating it. The artist says his work 'doesn't have a beginning or an end' and describes his creations as 'situations that have a dreamlike quality'. This not only generates an openness to a large variety of interpretations for the viewer but also engenders an artistic production that is predominantly geared towards its own assemblage: visual references to Greek tragedy, dance, politics and historical eras are juxtaposed with ready-made artefacts and references to sculpture, yet their presentation seems the only thing that is binding them. The overall image remains scraped together, demonstrating that Hempel's dream is constructed out of the harsh necessities of display.

Lothar Hempel
Vorwärts!
(Forward!)
2006
Wood, paint, metal, light
bulbs
220x125x80 cm

The posters, paintings, photographs, sculptures and videos that Hempel selected with curator Florence Derieux for 'Alphabet City' individually illustrate their inherent mannerism. Sharp silhouettes rule the black and white images of his dancing figures. Their two-dimensionality is enhanced by their inclusion in collages or as blown-up free-standing elements. The wooden frames that support them are for everyone to see and meticulously demystify their illusory impact. Regarding their apparent link with theatrical dramaturgy and expression, Hempel's dancers represent more of a bodily control of creativity instead.

In his photographs Hempel changes the eye colour of music icons Iggy Pop (*Renaissance*, 2006) and Joy Division front man Ian Curtis (*New Dawn Fades*, 2003) to pink and blue, interfering with the black and white origins of the images and their sentimental significance in contemporary pop culture. The paintings shown in 'Alphabet City' depict free-standing theatrical characters, elegantly shaped *en silhouette* in front of a monochrome background. Their manner of depiction reflects the exhibition's general sensibility: their bodies are segmented, built out of individual shapes and colours, and are controlled by the analytical eye of the artist.

Despite the apparently decisive nature of these works, however, Hempel reveals underlying doubts about his processes in the texts that accompany a large part of his work (both within the exhibition and its catalogue). These read like diary extracts, frequently dated and always written in the first person. Charged with a sense of melancholia and expectation – as though the protagonist is hoping to retrace a lost memory – these texts have overtaken their dreamlike quality entirely and represent instead the frustration of waking up. Their fragmented and open structure resonates an echo of a dream followed by the sense of powerlessness at not being able to capture the full capacity of its original impact. Preoccupied with the obvious limitations of reconstructing this lost impact, some texts start to rationalize every hint of euphoria: the sun turns out to be a fake one, mysterious fog is made by a smoke machine and a heightened state of emotion is caused by a mind-expanding drug.

It is this gap between memory and the attempts to describe that memory to the outside world that consistently returns in Hempel's oeuvre. As in the classical story of Icarus – also the title of a video work from 2002 – men can control their destiny only to a certain degree. Every attempt outside their limits results in having to go back to the drawing board. Hempel shows us that it is hard work to find a balance between creativity and the demands of the public demeanours of art. Yet it is this imbalance that seems to operate as his inspirational fuel. Hempel's artistic production is laden with high hopes and expectations that draw audiences into his unique and experimental manner of storytelling.

Bart van der Heide

Lothar Hempel

ARTFORUM



Lothar Hempel

MAGASIN—CENTRE NATIONAL D'ART
CONTEMPORAIN, GRENOBLE, FRANCE

Claire Moulène

IN 1996 Nicolas Bourriaud included Lothar Hempel in "Traffic" at CAPC in Bordeaux, France, placing the German artist alongside numerous others of his generation such as Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Since then, Hempel's star has perhaps not burned as brightly as these other artists', but this spring saw him return to France for his first retrospective—or "flashback," as the dreamlike nature of the show at Grenoble's Magasin seemed to suggest.

Organized by curator Florence Dericieux, "Alphabet City" featured more than sixty pieces, spanned eleven rooms, and was bookended by an emblematic pair of works. At the beginning was *Vorwärts!* (Forward!), 2006—appropriately titled but, given the date of its making, also an indicator that the show was more thematic than chronological—in which a photograph of a girl with a drum (at a Swiss festival in the '60s) sits atop a small Indian bronze horse crowned by a lightbulb. And at the very end of the show was *Untitled*, 1998, a color photograph of a young man (drink and cigarette in hand, flower in shirt pocket) wearing several crosses and amulets around his neck. He is one of sixteen Uruguayan rugby players—

out of a group of forty-five—who survived the infamous 1972 plane crash in the Andes; the original photograph was taken at a reunion of the survivors one year later.

Traversing all Hempel's work are such borrowed images, lifted from history and from a wide range of disciplines and media, such as psychology, geology, cinema, and music; at the same time, his strategies for object making variously conjure the Bauhaus, Constructivism, and even Joseph Beuys. Yet all these references are left by the artist in a kind of suspension, like pendulums in mid-swing—their significance subsequently as uncertain as that of the sculptural ensembles in which they are often housed. With these first and last works it was clear that Hempel's very practice was, from beginning to end, being presented here in a manner befitting the unclassifiable, atemporal quality of his installations: ceaselessly hesitating between narrativity and formalism, playing with codes of representation, perpetually staging itself. Hempel's pieces seem to be both character and setting, and viewers wander through his installations as though in a theater of appearances. We find ourselves in a story, but one that we do not know.

Indeed, certain installations—such as a new work (*ABC*, 2007) featuring a '70s photograph of dancers in the Bronx—seemed to operate within a floating spatio-temporal zone, transformed into ghostly and cinematic presences even while their sculptural compositions might bring together such disparate elements as lightbulbs, pink Plexiglas, video monitors, and a small wooden boat. Despite this mix of materials, numerous Hempel works are distinguished by their flatness, inviting viewers to walk around them only to have any illusion, or narrative, vanish when they turn the corner to discover all is decor. This flatness also arises clearly in his colorful, frieze-like paintings. These single "portraits" of men and women standing in profile form a series of oblique

symbols. But a kind of two-dimensionality characterizes even Hempel's almost clownish mannequins—disembodied heads as well as full figures, typically covered in felt—which seem more like concepts than characters, ideas than finished objects.

This sense of diminishment is apparent as well when Hempel addresses culture at large, as when he intimates the bankruptcy of ideologies—as well as a disenchantment with a world merely turning in circles—in *Abstrakter Sozialismus* (Abstract Socialism), 2002: Here Marxist doctrine is reduced to a miner's lamp and video monitor beside a rusty bicycle without a front tire, the whole ensemble set on a revolving platform. But the other side of the ideological spectrum is no more promising. Portraits of singers—Ian Curtis, Iggy Pop, Beck—haunt this exhibition. The artist was a DJ in Cologne in the late '80s, and these rock and pop icons seem like tutelary figures for a disillusioned generation, promising no more fulfillment today.

In her catalogue essay, Dericieux writes that Hempel's work represents "a final act of resistance to the society of the spectacle." In other words, so much that is staged for us today—the images and ideas that are disseminated among us as "knowns"—are taken up by Hempel and shown as such: things staged. But to leave a discussion at that ignores the intellectual and emotive space that the artist nevertheless conjures for audiences even while underscoring culture's artifice. As the artist himself says, "In filmic language as in oneiric language, you find images that withstand both consumption and interpretation." And yet, at the conclusion of Hempel's story at Magasin we found ourselves faced by the young cannibal: an appropriated media image of a man whose life depended on consuming those around him—a portrait of the artist, and of us. □

CLAIRE MOULÈNE IS A CURATOR AND JOURNALIST IN PARIS.

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.



Opposite page: Lothar Hempel, *Escape from Innen* (detail), 2005, mixed media, 51 1/4 x 51 1/4". This page, from left: Lothar Hempel, *Vorwärts! (Forward!)*, 2006, wood, paint, bronze, and lightbulb, 86 1/2 x 41 1/4 x 31 1/2". Installation view, Magasin—Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France, 2007. Lothar Hempel, *Abstrakter Sozialismus* (Abstract Socialism), 2002, wood, paint, metal, bicycle, lantern, monitor, video, and rotation system, dimensions variable. Lothar Hempel, *ABC*, 2007, color photographs, wood, paint, and lightbulbs, dimensions variable.



Flash Art

GRENOBLE, FRANCE

LOTHAR HEMPEL

MAGASIN

Despite a formally disparate and varied practice that jumps from one medium to another — collage, video, painting, installation, sculpture — this first retrospective of Lothar Hempel is bound together by a great sense of coherence. The works, in various media, are distributed throughout the exhibition like so many elements of theater décor: ambient lighting fixtures, mannequins and images compose scenes of a floating world. This is particularly true of works such as *Kunstschnee Will Schmilzen*, 1998. Characters in cut-out silhouettes are linked to the paintings, collages and sparse objects throughout, bringing to mind the teeming activity of Öyvind Fahlström's large installations, but in a more delicate way. However, no essential narrative ties the entire ensemble together.



LOTHAR HEMPEL, ABC, 2007. Mixed media, installation view. © Magasin - Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France.

MAY JUNE 2007 Flash Art 139

History is alternatively transformed into elements of décor, as in the series of miniatures after Stella, or, in its most somber form, returns to haunt the reverie of the characters depicted herein. Perhaps the sense of coherence produced by the exhibition is that of a secret coherence, as in a dream. History alternates between a nightmare from which the viewer tries to disembrace him/herself or a gentle dream wherein refuge is found.

Oneiric associations are materialized in the collages and assemblages of forms and disparate materials, creating a grand illusion, such as the one alluded to in the collage *Plakat III (Die Grosse Illusion)*, 2006. The recurrence of images of actors and dancers transforms the visitor into an actor or a dancer him/herself, the actor of his/her own strolling itinerary. Traversing the stage, or rather that which can be called "the show," becomes analogous to the self traversed by images, figures and events: a way of expressing the idea that everything one says about human beings is false — there is nobody inside, just a passing through. It would be vain to try and further decode this strange coherence in order to appreciate it, because the exhibition engenders, by its openness, a non-artistic way of perceiving art, which is no less legitimate than a traditionally informed way of appreciation, and is one of its most winning qualities.

Vincent Pécoul

(Translated from French by Chris Sharp)



Pale Carnage, 2007 (installation view). Photo: Jamie Woodley. Courtesy Arnolfini, Bristol

PALE CARNAGE

ARNOLFINI, BRISTOL

17 FEBRUARY - 15 APRIL

Pale Carnage is a show with an idea. That idea, though never precisely defined, takes in modernism, the aesthetics of purity and fascism. Or as the curator Martin Clark describes it, "the point where utopianism flips over into oppression".

There's a lot to absorb. The main gallery confronts the visitor with a disconcerting variety of objects that only gradually begin to make sense. Lothar Hempel's monumental 2007 work *Nachts, wenn alles schläft!* (*In the dead of night, when everything sleeps*) combines classical sculpture with allusions to theories of the unconscious. Arranged at a diagonal

across the centre of the space, four blocks rise and fall in height: a minimalist tympanum. Images of artefacts from the Acropolis cover their sides, which support a crow and a brightly coloured stuffed trumpeter. Echoing Hempel's suggestion of weirdly eroticised militarism, an incessant drumming emanates from Aïda Ruilova's short video *Beat and Perv* (1999). In it a young woman, strung-out but baby-faced, rocks to and fro in front of a mirror, screeching dementedly. In an adjacent room, Athanasios Argianas's clean, precise technique is shown off in two very different forms. His painting *Braid Series 2* (2006) meticulously depicts the braids and plaits on the backs of women's heads, lavishing them with the same detail a conventional portraitist would the face. In contrast, *Lyrical Machine* and *Song Machine No. 6* (both 2006) are geometric sculptures, the first a metal cradle surmounted by concentric Stars of David, the second six plywood frames – that radiate from a central point.

Mark Leckey's film *Parade* (2003) mesmerises with visuals and sound that border on the psychedelic. The camera takes in a continuously changing stream of images: street scenes, pictures from magazines, a sparsely furnished room. Our companion on this trip is an eccentrically dressed observer who registers no emotion, a modern-day flâneur, jaded and indifferent.

Elsewhere there are some unlikely but happy artistic pairings. Cerith Wyn Evans's *A Short History of the Shadow* (2004), a lamp that flashes out a text in Morse code, faces J.D. Williams's boot-polish paintings. Tom Burr's cool abstraction acts as the foil to Nobuyoshi Araki's florid scenes of bondage, and Ulla von Brandenburg's gigantic black-and-white mural glowers over everything.

You would expect the narrow space that separates dreams of utopia from an ugly reality to be filled with uneasiness and foreboding. Viewed as a whole, *Pale Carnage* delivers just that kind tension. Argianas's severe styling, the austerity of Hempel's contemporary classicism, Araki's discomfiting photographs; it makes for an exciting ride, but perhaps doesn't add up to a show about the political and aesthetic ambiguity of modernism's darker side. Still, if the analogy doesn't really stand up to scrutiny, Clark has engineered himself a get-out clause: the 'theme' is merely a personal starting point, a filter through which he has come to view some of the artists' work. And in the end it doesn't really matter. The work is powerful enough to blow quibbles about intellectual consistency out of the water. *David Shariatmadari*

18 • 19 // LETHAR HEMPEL // [voir] - expo

LOTHAR HEMPEL

ALPHABET CITY

AU MAGASIN, L'EXPOSITION RÉTROSPECTIVE DE LOTHAR HEMPEL NOUS INVITE À UNE DÉAMBULATION DANS L'ESPACE NARRATIF QUE COMPOSE LA RÉUNION DES ŒUVRES POLYSÉMIQUES DE CET ARTISTE ALLEMAND.

Texte de François Aubart et Sadie Woods

L'exposition *Alphabet City* de Lothar Hempel, qui se développe dans les galeries principales du Magasin, reformule dix ans de la pratique de cet artiste. Les œuvres qui la compose sont constituées d'éléments de provenances diverses, de l'imagerie artistique aux icônes populaires, en passant par une iconographie sociale. Cette tactique d'assimilation est devenue coutumière dans l'histoire de la production artistique, mais ce qui change chez Lothar Hempel c'est la destination d'une telle entreprise. Car le plus souvent l'appropriation et le détournement dans leurs formulations habituelles sont fondés sur un retour sur investissement : le détournement, tel qu'il est formulé par Guy Debord et les Situationnistes, s'empare d'un vocabulaire idéologique pour le revêtir d'une autre idéologie ; l'appropriation des pères de la modernité fonde, chez Sturtevant par exemple, une critique de la légitimité de ceux-ci. Au cinéma, le montage permet à Giorgio Agamben d'affirmer qu'« on fait du cinéma avec du cinéma ». Le produit final n'est jamais que le même, différemment. Pour déplacer le principe dans un autre secteur de production artistique, le Rock, selon Christophe Kihm, a fait de la reprise une modalité symptomatique d'expression et d'évolution qui consiste à reparamétrer une composition musicale. Ces modifications effectuées, l'œuvre qui en résulte s'inscrit dans un champ référentiel modéré par son original

et ses éventuelles autres modulations. C'est ce jeu d'auto-référence qui est dévié par Lothar Hempel. Les éléments qu'il utilise sont bien arrachés de leurs contextes originels, mais leur lieu d'arrivée ne leur offre pas de reformulation symbolique stable. Ainsi, *Abstrakter Sozialismus* (socialisme abstrait) se compose d'un vélo Bismarck posé sur un socle rotatif lui-même parsemé d'éléments géométriques. Le véhicule de l'ouvrier se transforme en un simple motif servant d'élément décoratif à une machine spectaculaire lancée dans une rotation sans fin, mêlant révolution et contemplation extatique. On y observe la transformation d'un signe en un élément détaché de toute conviction unilatérale.

Retranscrits en peinture, recomposés sous forme d'objets tridimensionnels ou remaniés en vidéo, les extraits que l'artiste utilise se refondent dans un ensemble énigmatique. L'exposition dans sa globalité est ainsi ponctuée d'œuvres qui une fois réunies composent la trame d'un scénario ouvert, dont les tenants et les aboutissants restent en suspens. À cette polysémie d'interprétations sont adjoints des textes, rédigés par l'artiste, dont la forme narrative est détachée de tout contexte. On y lit des histoires aux potentiels évocateurs forts et qui remettent en question une localisation au sein d'une histoire précise. Elles errent, comme les œuvres qu'elles accompagnent, sans début ni



Lothar HEMPEL
Escape From KRISTALL, 2005
Photographies, technique mixte ; 130 x 130 cm
Courtoisie c/o - Atle Gerhardsen, Berlin

Lothar HEMPEL
Nur das Lächeln bleibt (Only the Smile Remains), 1999
Bois, peinture, verre, ampoules ; 190 x 200 x 160 cm
Collection Hort Family

LOTHAR HEMPEL
»» JUSQU'AU 9/04
Le Magasin Cnac
Site Bouchayer-Viallet
155 cours Berriat,
38028 Grenoble cedex 1
www.magasin-cnac.org

expo-voir // LOTHAR HEMPEL

fin, sans provenance ni but, dans un espace aux multiples directions. Ainsi plusieurs œuvres, telles que *Nur das Lächeln bleibt* (Seul le sourire reste), sont composées de représentations de personnages découpés dans des imprimés de provenances diverses, puis agrandies sur des panneaux qui viennent orner un socle apparenté à une scène de théâtre. L'extraction de leurs contextes d'origine transforme ces éléments en un matériau brut, délocalisé, et vidé de ses sens d'origine. Ainsi détachées de toute contingence, détournant les connotations et les intentions auxquelles ces images étaient soumises, ces mêmes images sont reformulées dans un espace où une action, une narration, semble inhérente. Les réalisations de Lothar Hempel apparaissent ainsi comme les éléments d'un propos dont l'articulation logique a disparu, dont la direction reste à construire. Le spectateur en ce lieu énigmatique, qui ne tient plus tant de l'espace de monstration que de l'espace scénique, est invité à prendre en main les éventualités proposées par l'artiste, à leur adjoindre une temporalité. La polysémie ouverte qu'il met en place s'appréhende comme une invitation à la mise en marche de scénarios multiples, composables à partir des opportunités que constituent ses œuvres. Ainsi, au fond de ce long couloir que composent les différentes salles du Magasin, la visite se termine face à *Vorwärts!* (Arrière !). Photographie trouvée et trouée d'une jeune femme en marche frappant sur un tambour, installée sur un cheval en métal sur la tête duquel une ampoule allumée figure l'injonction du titre ; elle nous invite également à parcourir l'exposition en sens inverse.

GRENOBLE

Lothar Hempel

**MAGASIN CNAC, CENTRE
NATIONAL D'ART
CONTEMPORAIN**

**Site Bouchayer-Viallet, 155 cours
Berriat**

February 11–May 6

The layers of Lothar Hempel's dense artworks are indeed manifold, with references to ideologies, music, theater, Greek tragedy, politics, and historical eras adding up to one uniquely complex world. Curated by Florence Derieux, the artist's first large-scale retrospective presents more than sixty pieces, including new work made specially for the exhibition. The show follows less of a chronological protocol than a thematic one, with drawings, videos, sculptures, installations, pictures, and collages sorted according to the miscellaneous methodology of many of the works themselves. In the first room, the viewer is greeted by *Vorwärts* (Forward), 2006, comprising an old, large, black-and-white photograph of a woman with an umbrella mounted on a metal horse of Indian origin. This assemblage is a good example of how Hempel stitches together different media and questions. As the exhibition unfolds, it becomes clear that Hempel's universe is a flexible one, with the potential to expand endlessly via a complex circuit of references and cross-fertilizations. Many of the works recall surreal stage sets, exploring and amplifying spatial tropes of flatness and depth. *Der Kompass Spielt Verrückt* (The Compass Goes Crazy), 2006, features another photograph of a lady with an umbrella, this one freestanding behind a wooden frame while steel, bronze, and aluminum rings arranged on the floor weave a narrative of confusion, complexity, and perfectionism. Here, Hempel's multifaceted body of work is brought together in an unironic yet humorous, seamless yet scattered, theatrical whole.



Der Kompass Spielt Verrückt (The Compass Goes Crazy), 2006, wood, plastic, steel, bronze alloy, aluminum, lamp, and photograph, 70 7/8 x 35 7/16 x 37 3/8". Installation view, 2007.

—Power Ekroth

120



Art de Cologne propos recueillis par Nicolas Trembley, portrait Kira Bunse

"Une rétrospective, c'est comme une psychanalyse. Vous restructurez les relations entre différentes images du passé pour produire une version idéalisée du présent." Consacré au Magasin de Grenoble, Lothar Hempel décrit pour *Numéro* son processus de création.



Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Sei um Gottes Willen vorsichtigl (Be Careful For God's Sake!), 2006.

Lothar Hempel, dandy sensible et discret de la génération 60's, n'a pas vécu les grandes révolutions politiques, sociales et artistiques du ^{xx}e siècle, mais continue d'en véhiculer une relecture par son art. Cet artiste de Cologne bénéficie aujourd'hui d'une grande rétrospective, sa première, au Magasin de Grenoble. Difficile de cerner formellement ce travail qui brouille les références et réactive des icônes à travers des personnages parfois fantomatiques, héroïques ou honnis, filtrés via des mannequins en feutrine, des photographies ou des peintures.

Son art porte sur des images diverses, des strates, de l'accumulation, des références croisées. Il cristallise des moments précis, ceux d'une utopie ou d'un engagement, et nous renvoient à notre présent. Que reste-t-il ? Qui reste pour résister ? Et résister à quoi ? C'est flou, opaque, et cela oscille entre le Bauhaus, le design, le graphisme, les années 70, le théâtre, les costumes, la mode. Hempel pense que nous vivons une période effroyable : culture populaire, masses, foules, communautés sont au cœur de ce travail intelligent, et c'est dans son atelier qu'il nous reçoit pour en parler.

Numéro : Etes-vous stressé par cette première exposition rétrospective ?

Lothar Hempel : Pas vraiment stressé, même si une bienséante dose de trac entre en jeu dans toute apparition publique. Je suis davantage inquiet des implications liées à la rétrospective. Jusqu'à quel point elle me définit comme un sujet artistique qui réalise des choses d'une manière unique, "à la Hempel". Si vous ne faites pas attention, des expositions comme celle-ci peuvent très bien vous enterrer pour de bon, tant elles ont tendance à prouver que ce que vous faites a un sens. J'ai toujours su qu'une certaine liberté d'expression peut se perdre si l'on devient trop satisfait de ses propres qualités. Il faut faire preuve d'une très forte personnalité pour combattre son propre succès de manière à garder suffisamment de distance par rapport à soi-même.

Avez-vous produit des nouveaux travaux pour l'exposition ?

Je réalise une nouvelle installation pour *La Ville Alphabet*. Elle va s'appeler ABC et elle s'appuie sur une photo publicitaire en noir et blanc pour la Harlem Experimental Dance Company, datée de 1981. C'est l'image incroyable de cinq femmes dans un moment de danse et de joie quasi extatique. Mais

122

ces femmes sont des danseuses professionnelles qui savent parfaitement bien comment se présenter. Leurs mouvements sont ritualisés. Leurs sourires sont des signaux. Il n'y a rien de naturel dans cette photographie, elle est purement artificielle. Je vais en faire un agrandissement de trois mètres de haut sur six mètres de large, et la découper en fragments, chacun mettant en lumière un aspect différent de l'image de départ. C'est une intervention cinématique. Comme des zooms sans mouvement, sans profondeur. À la fin, on verra trois structures sur pied qui pourraient former la toile de fond d'un studio de télé fictif. C'est aussi de là que vient le nom ABC – c'est un travail qui plonge au cœur des ténèbres : le spectacle de grande diffusion.

D'où vient cette photo ?

Comme d'habitude, cette photo vient de ma collection d'images trouvées. C'est une image qui me possède réellement. Cela fait déjà environ deux ans que je la regarde, et elle a fait son chemin en moi. Le moment est venu de la remettre en circulation, dans une nouvelle économie de signes, de façon à la changer en quelque chose d'imprévu. Mais le travail n'est pas encore fini. J'ai le sentiment que cette nouvelle œuvre va influencer la manière dont les œuvres plus anciennes seront perçues. Une rétrospective, c'est presque comme une psychanalyse. Vous restructurez les relations entre différentes images et différents moments du passé pour produire une version idéalisée du présent. C'est un processus à la fois beau et douloureux.

Et ce titre, *Ville Alphabet* ? Comparez-vous vos travaux produits depuis plus d'une dizaine d'années à une ville ? A une forme de design ? A une architecture ?

Comme toujours, j'ai choisi un titre qui sert de point de départ à une chaîne d'associations, comme le titre d'un film. *La Ville Alphabet* est chargée de références historiques, mais ce titre contient aussi la notion de "ville primitive", un modèle de cité où le quadrillage formé par les rues est la structure de base d'un langage servant de toile de fond à un échange infini de possibilités et de choix. J'aime beaucoup cette idée. Il me semble que tout mon travail de ces dix dernières années se place d'une certaine façon dans cet univers parallèle. Si vous regardez les textes que j'ai écrits pour accompagner mes installations, vous y trouverez toujours des descriptions de situations architecturales comme métaphores de constellations idéologiques, et vice versa. Au cours des années, tous ces travaux réalisés se sont transformés en un récit gigantesque où tout est relié. C'est un monde flottant. Rien n'est solide ici, dans la *Ville Alphabet*.

Votre travail est rempli de références souvent cryptées. Liam Gillick, dans le catalogue, dit que vous produisez "des espaces esthétiques dominés par les fantômes de moments particuliers du passé".

Mais il a aussi écrit dans la phrase suivante : "Pour-tant, il n'y a jamais lieu de taxer son œuvre de nostalgique." J'aime voir mes œuvres comme des lieux où l'on peut faire des rencontres. Là, on rencontre des fantômes et on partage un moment de pensée sur le possible et l'impossible. Ces fantômes sont des amis très chers et je me réjouis de vous les présenter.

Peut-on quand même dire que votre travail est empreint d'une certaine mélancolie liée à l'idée de révolution au sens politique, ou d'une utopie ?

Bien sûr, la fin de l'utopie est le grand thème de nombreux artistes de notre époque. Je pense que mes premiers travaux avaient souvent une résonance presque apocalyptique. C'était une ère de destruction joyeuse. Un geste très romantique. Maintenant, je suis moins sceptique. Évidemment, nous vivons dans une époque horrible et je me sens impuissant, mais je trouve un certain réconfort dans la certitude qu'il s'agit d'une période de transition.

Vous imaginez un hier meilleur qu'un aujourd'hui ?

Cela dépend. Peut-être serait-il pertinent de citer un texte que j'ai écrit pour l'exposition *Samstag Morgen, Zuckersumpf* (Samedi matin, marais sucré) à la Galerie Robert Prime à Londres, en 1997. C'est une sorte de journal des expériences d'un groupe fictif dans une situation fictive à une époque fictive, qui résume assez bien mon sentiment sur la vie.

Jeudi

"Il nous faut devenir bien plus abstraits", a dit Andrew ce matin, et lui-même a été obligé d'en rire, parce qu'au lieu d'abstrait, il aurait aisément pu dire concret. Ce n'est probablement qu'une question de temps avant que nous nous séparions pour aller travailler et vivre dans de nouveaux groupes. Le nouveau ne sera pas pire ou meilleur que l'ancien, seulement différent, et peut-être ne sera-t-il qu'une façon pour chacun de retourner où il était auparavant. Toutes les attitudes possibles face à la vie semblent reliées par un magnifique système de portes, que l'on ne traverse que pour le plaisir de passer le seuil.

Et demain... que se passera-t-il après la rétrospective ?

Selon la logique de mon texte, je devrais répondre : demain, c'est samedi, samedi, c'est *Samstag Morgen, Zuckersumpf* !

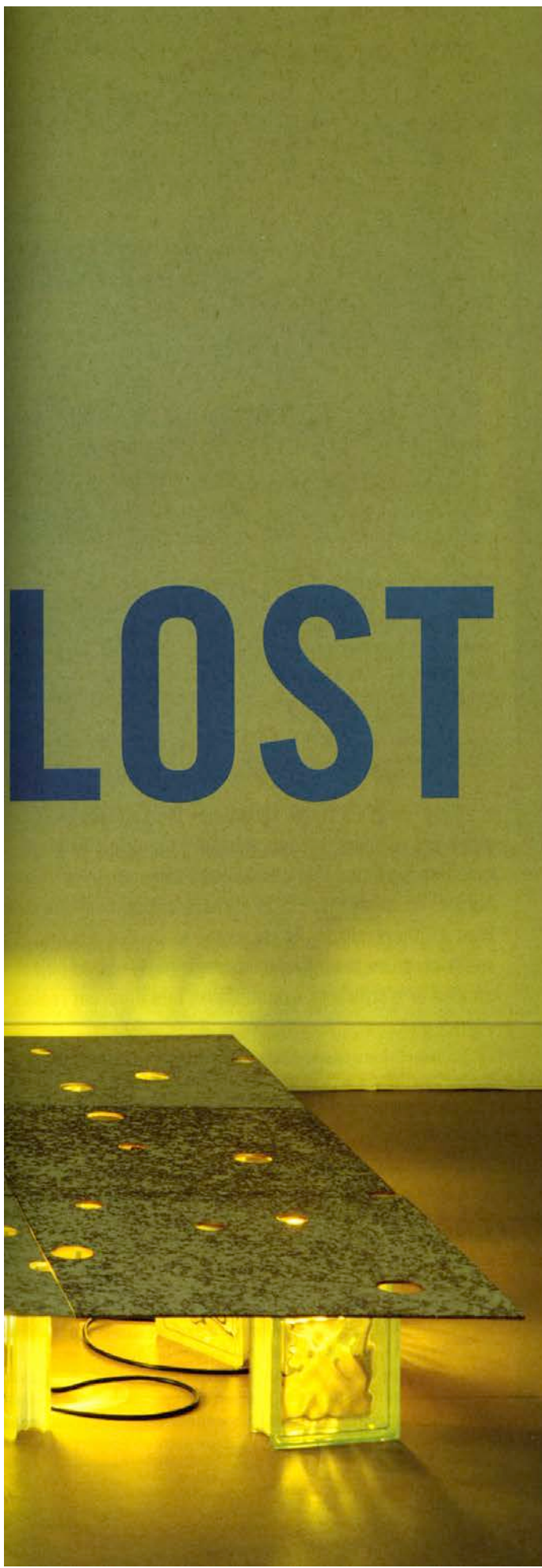
Alphabet City rétrospective Lothar Hempel au Magasin, Centre national d'art contemporain 155, cours Bernat, Grenoble
Tél 04 76 21 95 84 www.magasin-cnac.org Jusqu'au 6 mai

Courtesy Robert Price, London

LET'S GET

Jennifer Higgle on Lothar Hempel

Only the Smile Remains 1999
Painted wood, glass bricks, lights 190x200x160 cm



LOST

The story so far: you've forgotten what year it is. You've been travelling for a long time and you feel a little bewildered. You're walking down a street when a door to a theatre swings open. You enter, feeling like a trespasser but curious nonetheless. The theatre is deserted, full of echoes. It looks as if the play has finished and everyone has gone home and the stage – empty and expectant – is about to be transformed into something else. You wander around, look at the sets (which, as you have no idea what the play's about, look like sculptures), at the lights, at the scattered residue of itinerant human occupation, searching for clues as to why you might have been so wordlessly invited in. Pink and yellow perspex sheets hang from the ceiling, momentarily dazzling drab corners with flashes of colour. Snapshots of people you don't know have been left in a dressing room, along with an undated diary which you read. You feel perplexed and slightly mesmerised by the situations and people the unknown author describes – dreamy travellers and post-apocalyptic landscapes, puzzling exchanges and dysfunctional gestures. It's impossible to tell whether this scenario is a work of fiction or of fact, whether it's heartfelt or obliquely manipulative of its audience – which is what you have unwittingly become. Walking down a hushed corridor, odd scraps of paper with indecipherable messages blow across your path. On one wall, someone has pinned a delicate, inscrutable drawing. There's a whirring projection in a dark corner. The people in it smoke a lot and seem subdued, their melancholy thoughts – about silence, birds, love, violence – float as subtitles, beneath them. All of the windows in the theatre are either boarded up, or part of a set: as if they've become the *idea* of windows – structures which let in nothing but their own expressive duplicity. Experienced individually, perhaps none of these things would amount to much. Experienced together, associations begin to hum, as potent as they are unavoidable. You become more and more aware of a charged atmosphere of anticipation: the building and the objects that inhabit it so silently seem to be waiting for something. Which they are. Without participants, a theatre – like an empty gallery – is simply another blank-faced building. But blank-faced buildings don't exist in the strange world of Lothar Hempel: absence isn't the same as emptiness. If they're blank, it doesn't mean they're vacant. It means they're resisting your gaze, hiding something, waiting for someone to bring it to life.

All spaces demand some form of participation from the people who move through them, but none more self-consciously than theatres and galleries – places where things mean other things and words wrestle with other words. Halfway houses between the world and its reflection, they are as haunted by the past as they are obsessed with their potential: buffers or channels between perception and the objects or places we need to interpret it. By proposing the gallery space as analogous to the constantly changing space of the stage, Hempel emphasises how flimsy, even interchangeable, the structures integral to the development of any form of representation are. 'Art has played itself out and must become theatrical to preserve itself – its objects must become performance like to have effect and meaning' wrote Donald Kuspit. Hempel suggests a similar, if less dogmatic system. If Modernism



Leave All the Rest Behind 1999
MDF, permanent marker, acrylic paint, neon, two videos 246 x 279 x 261 cm

expunged context for the sake of content, he does the opposite – cramming images so full of references and ideas that it's difficult to know where to start looking at them.

Trying to make sense of Hempel's most recent New York installation, 'America Disappears, the Smile Remains', is like trying to unravel the complicated mind of a talented teenager: it changed its mind, medium and look at every turn, seemed to enjoy telling stories as much as it did in withholding the ending, wanted to be a performer but was too shy, was preoccupied with travelling and romantic love and shot through with a atmosphere of stoned disorientation and amplified reverie. It gave you the sense that although the outside world may be exciting, it's also intrusive and best experienced at that most transitional time of day, twilight. None of which, I hasten to add, is a criticism. (After

with axe to grind? Gorilla warfare?). Who knows? Who to ask? This semantic confusion played conceptual tag with the installation opposite it: *A Simple Story* (1999), another large, speckled MDF cut-out, this time of boy on a semi-legless red-eyed pony with a large light bulb glowing in its shoulder – a sombre, dappled resurrection permanently stilled in the act of emerging from the floor. Images might complement words, and words might refer to images, but nonetheless, their relationship is usually a difficult one – both need to speak a second language in order to understand each other. Hempel's titles-as-proposals (for example, *A Clear Almost Singing Voice*, 1997, *Black Ebb*, *Hot Flow*, 1997, *Loose Laughter*, 1999, *Only the Smile Remains* 1999, *Akin to Shadows*, 1999) reflect this conundrum: refusing to clarify exactly what they're proposing while cultivating an atmosphere of associ-

If all the world's a stage, sometimes life can feel like a stage you're going through. Hempel's theatricality, predicated on the belief that an audience will actually work as hard as he wants them to, is earnest, unsceptical and more than a little idealistic. He treats the world like a giant ready-made on the move, encouraging art – as an object, an idea or a style – to dematerialise into different realms.

all, Rimbaud was a teenager). It made something new and positive out of the remnants of that which has all but disappeared: the idea of both art and America as an homogenous entity.

A magazine cut-out of a girl with an axe, mounted on MDF, peers through two tall faux-stage sets. On top of one sits a cartoony sculpture of a Gorilla's head. Titled *Leave All the Rest Behind* (1999), the work is cryptic, to say the least. What's to be left behind? Who or what are 'All the rest'? Categories? Logic? Precedents? People you don't like? (Girl

ations. They're like poetic pokes in the eye to anyone who assumes titles exist to explain – rather than extend – the meaning of the work.

Cut-outs of desolate shacks, vague foliage, large plywood people and mysterious titles hang around Hempel's shows like mute, brooding extras in an uprising that refuses to state its agenda. Intricately drawn, they often glow with electric bulbs, have holes in unexpected places, and are full of allusions to impermanence – shadows, smiles, songs. It's possible to look at them from any angle –



A Simple Story 1999
MDF, permanent marker, acrylic paint, photographs 231 x 142 x 71 cm



Untitled #6 1999
Mixed media on paper 118x80 cm

you can walk through them, look through them, get behind them. Like sets, they split the exhibition space into a series of obliquely interrelated images – movement, youth, stories, escape – activated into changing colours by the simple pink or yellow perspex sheets which hang from the ceiling like internal windows. Implying a world outside the gallery, these huge faces stare beyond you with a self-absorption that can make you look over your shoulder – what could they possibly see that you can't? Casual photographs of people you've never met are pinned to the back of these structures and beg the question – who's looking at who, and why?

Hempel's retro-futuristic drawings and collages – usually untitled – veer between vague abstraction, pop-saturated images from magazines, fragile line drawings of disaffected, often deformed youth, and a kind of *Boys Own* obsession with men in uniform. Their confusion emanates a very late 20th-century feeling: a conflicting mix of potential and unease; that for every statement and every image holding centre stage, its opposite is waiting in the wings to contradict it. Areas of abstraction, for example, are toughened up by their proximity to a hard-eyed girl; a soldier is softened by his seemingly random relationship to a fey youth; a self-portrait abstracted with a patch of bright blue. There's nothing hard sell or slick about these images – they're often a little grubby and as determinedly casual as a doodle. This is drawing not as a manifesto, but as a registering of the passage of a restless imagination: an imagination cluttered with possibility and unhindered by reason.

Hempel has spoken of being a teenager in Germany in the late 70s and early 80s, overwhelmed by the feeling that the end of society as he knew it was imminent. His development of a visual language that might appropriately express a feeling of renewal through the destruction of old forms is echoed in Robert Morris' writing of the early 80s: 'An emotional weariness with what underlies them [Modernist forms] has occurred. I would suggest that the shift has occurred with growing awareness of the more global threats to the existence of life itself.'¹ Emotional weariness particularly suffuses Hempel's two screen video *Deuce* (1996-99) – a love story, a road movie and a study in political malaise. One screen is saturated in blue (a study in reverie), while the other one, which is red, casually tells a story: 'Recently we fell into the habit of blowing up bridges after we had crossed them. We simply took pleasure in studying the bridge for a while and discovering the weak point and then making it collapse with the smallest amount of explosive but it turns into an addiction.' Indifference bleeds into violence in the same way that boredom can facilitate change. Interspersed with intimate revelations and aphorisms ('intuition suddenly matters', 'one sees that all is transparent') and accompanied by the music of Hempel's band Trinkwasser, the film meanders without conclusion, a frustrated exploration ennui, unfocussed need and deferred desire.

Lengthy stories – pinned to the wall like drawings – read like diaries, and although unspecific about time, intimate a post-apocalyptic atmosphere that seeps into your understanding of Hempel's other work. These scenarios function like unstructured chapters in a never-to-be-finished novel: populated by young people who need to find different ways to survive and who are constantly on the move, their only baggage a pile of metaphors, as mesmerised by each other as they are by the world they find themselves moving through. Their tone is not so much anxious about the unnamed disaster they have survived as filled with the joys of renewal and a heightened awareness of the beauty of the world: 'I don't need your film anymore, she tells me. I keep my eyes open, I'm continually on the move and the film I see is what goes on around me. She laughs, and for a moment, I almost envy her.'

If all the world's a stage, sometimes life can feel like a stage you're going through. Hempel's theatricality, predicated on the belief that an audience will actually work as hard as he wants them to, is earnest, unsceptical and more than a little idealistic. He treats the world like a giant ready-made on the move, encouraging art – as an object, an idea or a style – to dematerialise into different realms. It's an approach which reflects a greater disintegration – that of knowing what art should do or be anymore, apart the one thing it's always been – a medium for change and an often conflicting fusion of ideas and images. Alluding to the stage, but exploiting the absence of performers, he asks nothing less than that the viewer become at once actor (an improvisational one at that) and spectator, taking an active role in the interpretation and creation of meaning – a meaning which emerges in his work in a way comparable to the way it emerges in life: as flashes of intuition, moments of clarity and usually inconclusively; through the fragments, connections, signs and sounds of our environments.

1. Donald Kuspit, 'The Ars Moriendi according to Robert Morris', *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s*, UMI Research Press, 1989

2. Ibid.