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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

THEASTER GATES: *MY LABOR IS MY PROTEST*

White Cube, Bermondsey, 7 September–11 November 2012

Reviewed by Rosalie Doubal, Independent Critic and Curator

A bright red 1967 Ford fire truck is suspended on cable pulleys from the roof at the centre of White Cube's 'South Galleries'. Counterbalancing this, a rectangular frame encasing hundreds of issues of *Ebony* magazine hangs ajar from the wall, with both objects hovering a foot above the gallery's vast polished floor. Mammoth in scale and weighty with historical resonance, the spectacular installation *Raising Goliath* (2012) knowingly espouses the visual sensation typical of the show-stopping artworks that frequently inhabit this outlandishly large commercial space. Perhaps an unexpected focus for the Chicago artist, his name now synonymous with the international ascension of social practice, it is aesthetic seduction – or 'sexiness' (Gates 2012) – that is brought to the fore in this London exhibition of artworks referencing histories of racial protest. In *Raising Goliath*, both the truck (the type of which was used to disperse the race riots of the Civil Rights movement) and the archive of African American cultural magazines are leveraged. Loaded and fetishized, this installation transforms salvaged objects into seductive racial matter – a slick, easy ready-made fit for sale. Most significantly, when installed in the gallery, the vehicle and publications are forcibly retired from use and granted the elevated uselessness typical of the work of art. Such transformations are at the core of Gates's practice, an artist for whom it would seem the prime labour of art is to influence change and amplify value. With this glossy work and other such spectacularly scaled pieces on show, the artist binds ideas of attraction to aesthetic transformation, placing desire, and ultimately belief, hand-in-hand with social politics.

Theaster Gates, installation views from My Labor Is My Protest *(2012): (above)* Raising Goliath *(2012), 1967 Ford fire truck, magazines, tar bucket, mop, steel and wire, dimensions variable; (below) view of* On Black Foundations *(2012), wood, glass, plastic, paper and make-up, dimensions variable, and* Johnson Editorial Library *(2012), dimensions variable, courtesy Johnson Publishing Company, LLC, all rights reserved. Photos: Ben Westoby, © Theaster Gates, courtesy White Cube.*

Predominant in this exhibition are Gates's *Civil Tapestry* works, formal wall-based arrangements of colourful strips of decommissioned fire hoses – the iconic instruments of racist crowd control. *Flag* (2012), comprising red, white and blue stripes of hosing sewn together on a large landscape canvas, riffs directly off the 1954 Jasper Johns work of the same title. Elsewhere, *Civil Landscape* (2012) is a geometric arrangement of eight square panels of cast black concrete. Echoing the colour fields of the American abstract expressionists, each dark expanse is interrupted by a singular sinew of fire hose. Here, the lines of the hoses echo the vertical stripes or 'zips' of Barnett Newman. Conjuring thought of Yves Klein's monochrome theories, Gates also presents four entirely black canvases, each made with wood, roofing paper and tar: *Roofing Exercise 1–3* (all 2012) and *Ain't I a Man* (2012). While the surfaces of the *Roofing Exercise* works are smooth, the latter is heavily marked with drips, calling to mind gestural abstraction. Sunken into the tarry surface of this work is the front cover of an August 1972 special edition of *Ebony* entitled 'The Black Male'. A provocative turn in the artist's obeisant dance through the modern history of white male painting, this direct act of reinvestment presents a further, disarmingly literal, act of leverage.

Far from a direct critique of the West's lionized painters, Gates's mimicry of their well-worn aesthetics represents an acknowledgement of the reifying power of the canon. By adopting the look of historical works now gifted with escalating worth, Gates not only addresses the unrivalled timelessness and persistent allure of formalism, but also lends sex appeal to his decommissioned materials. Furthermore, this tactic reveals Gates's significant sensitivity towards context and site. Flitting through the history of abstraction, Gates's *Civil Tapestry* works foreground the luxury of decontextualization. With the phenomenon of the 'white cube' gallery space commonly understood to be a result of a fixation with artistic isolation – a notion at odds with artworks that reassert the urgent significance of context – it follows that Gates addresses his London gallery show primarily as a site of commerce.

Foregrounding ideas concerning the creation of the desire to consume, Gates has chosen to screen *The Secret of Selling the Negro Market*, as part of the Gallery's screening program in the auditorium. Made in 1954 as a promotional film by the Johnson Publishing Company, the Chicago publishers of *Ebony* magazine, this promotional film aimed to encourage advertisers to promote their services through the African American media. Highlighting the novel buying power of the burgeoning black middle classes, this 22-minute promo splices together promising footage of African American professionals and housewives perusing and purchasing at the rate of knots.

The Chicago-based publishers are also represented in one of two participatory, or 'serviceable', works on show. Reminiscent of the redevelopment work currently being performed by Gates in the United States, an installation of books from the *Johnson Editorial Library* (2012) echoes the local archives salvaged and rehoused in Gates's *Dorchester Project* (2009). Unlike his labours in urban development, however, the emphasis of Gates's London-based work is not the production of socially useful objects, ones that fully integrate themselves with the vagaries of everyday

life. Gates's Fitzcarraldian attempt to heave the Editorial Library archive over the Atlantic remains rather symbolic for example, for within the pristine walls of this privileged capital site the books are relatively untouched. Following on from the artist's participatory projects staged in Chicago, whereby his works solicited a double ontological status (Wright 2008) as both social action and as a proposition of that very same action, an expectation admittedly exists that one will attend this exhibition as an embodied participant. Critically, Gates purposefully infuriates such expectations, presenting amidst a sea of wall-based and sculptural works only a minimal 'participatory' offering, choosing to alternately concentrate on unearthing art's complicity within the creation of economic value and worth. For if one appreciates the artist's objects to be part of one circular ecology comprising his labours as artist, musician and urban developer, then London must be understood as a site of economic exchange. The artworld mediates the transformation of his material from discarded object to new object of worth, which is then reframed and sold to fuel social change in Midwestern US states.

Further toying with the idea of sex, exposition and aesthetic enhancement, the participatory installation *On Black Foundations* (2012) offers viewers a free Fashion Fair makeover. This comprises a static display of vanity stands displaying cosmetics designed for black women by Fashion Fair, a subsidiary of the Johnson Publishing Company. With limited opportunities to partake in such a treat, actual participation in this work is sparse and one senses that deliberate failures have been sewn into its fabric, with the artist again teasing the needy audience by toying with the expectation that he will provide art-for-all via a genuinely useful and fully serviceable work. Accordingly, there remains something knowingly tongue-in-cheek about Gates's claims to be attempting to activate a new audience for the gallery via the invitation of black women to White Cube. This is a consciously troublesome work, a useful-looking gesture that begets similar discomfort to that experienced when faced with 'The Black Male' embedded within the tarry surface of Gates's monochrome.

Such moments of unease or doubt, whether provoked by an unfulfilled expectation, a seemingly cold approach to commercialism, or the use of an unfounded image of service provision, are when Gates's art is at its best. A practice concerned with the loading and reloading of material, when exhibited within White Cube, Gates's disruptive works foreground an interest in the proximities of irrational belief, aesthetics and social politics. The creation of value plays a significant role in the generative economy that lies at the heart of Gates's practice, forcing viewers to test and confront the criteria applied to both art and the social field. Performing acts of leverage as mighty as the raising of a fire truck and as modest as the application of a slick of lipstick, with *My Labor Is My Protest* one can see perhaps the clearest example to date of Gates's belief in art's talismanic and transformative potential.

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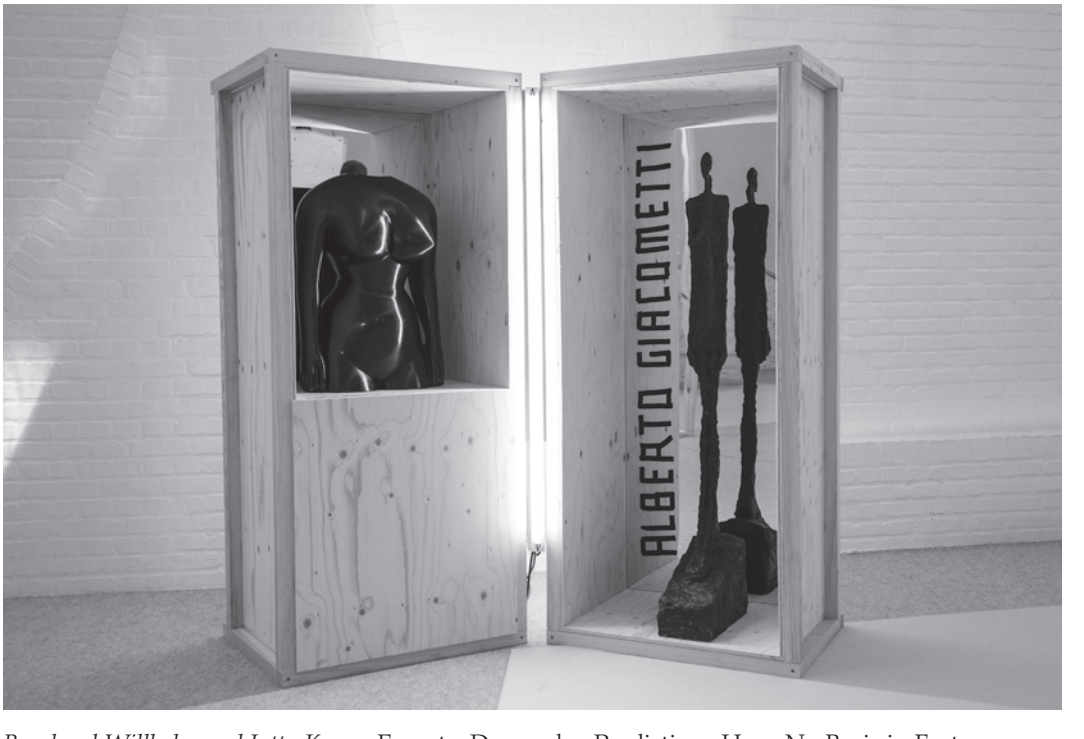
EXPERTS: DOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS HAVE NO BASIS IN FACT OR HISTORY

Curated by Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, 15 May 2012–13 January 2013

Reviewed by Charlene K. Lau, York University

Bernhard Willhelm is an *enfant terrible* of the fashion world in all senses of the term; never one to adhere strictly to tradition, he prefers to breach what it means to be a fashion designer and conventional boundaries of good taste. Through a multidisciplinary practice that includes performance, long-standing collaborations with artists, and more traditional runway presentations, Willhelm and his business partner Jutta Kraus have redefined contemporary avant-gardism through the lens of fashion. With this knowledge in mind, the Middelheim Museum invited Willhelm and Kraus to reimagine the display of the 50-year-old permanent collection, not only by bringing key sculptures out of storage, but also by disrupting modes of seeing.

Primarily known as an outdoor sculpture park, the Middelheim houses temporary exhibitions like *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History* in the modernist Braem Pavilion. German artist Carsten Fock's trademark block lettering of the exhibition title on the window of the pavilion initially greets the viewer and immediately one knows that something is amiss. Once inside, visitors are directed to a room where Fock's text instructs them to 'Please protect your shoes'. I opt to remove my shoes, and proceed to pad around the carpeted exhibition space, as if it were my living room. An outsized yellow felt arrow on the floor indicates a meandering path through the installation, and terminates at a tree-like plywood structure that holds publications on sculpture in general, as well as on artists whose works are held in the Middelheim collection. Although the venue feels like a generously-sized living room, the exhibition resembles more a playroom or carnival fun house than anything, examining not only ideas of the body as subject matter for sculpture, but also how bodies behave in the exhibition space. Here, the physical hybridizes with the metaphysical. As the pavilion is hidden in the forest of the Middelheim,



Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus, Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History *(2012–13), installation views. Photos: © Joris Casaer, courtesy Middelheim Museum, Antwerp.*

the exhibition space easily transforms into a place of contemplation and thought. The result is an environment that satiates both the mental and physical states of the body.

The exhibition is a glimpse into the Willhelm's fantastical utopia and its subversive playfulness. Sculptures by Jean Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Käthe Kollwitz and Auguste Rodin have been perched by the curators alongside (relatively) more contemporary works by Paul Van Hoeydonck, Peter Rogiers and Kurt Trampedach. Some are stuffed into unfinished plywood 'crates', while others rest casually atop the wooden structures. The works are simultaneously made precious in their sheltered placement, yet have the same preciousness stripped by means of the rough-hewn containers. Bare fluorescent tube lighting illuminates some of the works, but lends a vibrant glow, almost achieving a futurity rather than reminding one of unfortunate grade-school classrooms or characterless office cubicles. Mirrors reflect the inaccessible backs of some of the sculptures, allowing the viewer to see all-around, including one's own body in the juxtaposition. Experiencing the works in this way is what Middelheim curator Sara Weyns likens to discovering treasures in jewel boxes. As some works are shown above eye-level, the viewer looks up and around. It is a hyperactive experience where one is forced to move more freely in the space, sit on wonky-looking chairs, or climb on ladders to get a better look. Thus, the change in perspective is twofold: viewers are led not only to think outside of conventional modes of display in the white cube environment, they are also asked to change their physical behaviour in moving about the space.

Despite containing many of the exhibition's works in boxes, Willhelm and Kraus seek to resist metaphorical boxes in their own practice. To borrow from Theodor Adorno's work on Wagner and *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is their 'intention to obliterate the frontiers separating the individual arts' (Adorno 1985: 97). As Weyns (2012) says, 'chaos and richness is what they wanted, not structure' and that the exhibition seemed still 'too classical' for them. Several times during the installation process, Willhelm dismissed arrangements as 'too *Elle Décoration*' in reference to the interior decorating magazine and its penchant for tasteful home interiors (Weyns 2012). *Experts* lives up to its curators' wild imaginations. The Middelheim has received negative feedback about Willhelm and Kraus's curation, including one e-mail that objected to how Giacometti's *Venice II* (1956) was shown (presumably because it was confined to a crate and lit by a fluorescent tube). For what is the avant-garde if it does not test limits, pose critical questions, and subvert disciplinary norms? Willhelm and Kraus reinvigorate the avant-garde project with their fantastical visual practice, whether it is with exhibitions like *Experts* or their outrageous fashions.

Although rare, the fashion designer-curator hybrid has a few precedents. This pairing specifically calls to mind the Hedi Slimane-curated exhibition, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (2007), at Arndt & Partner Berlin. Slimane – who at the time was creative director of Dior Homme, and is now at the helm of Saint Laurent Paris – promotes a cult of personality. This was translated directly into *Sweet Bird of Youth* in that it was a colourless (read: black and white) exhibition that adhered strictly to Slimane's

austere personal aesthetic. Willhelm is no different with his '*totalizing* vision' for *Experts* (Roberts 2011: 146, emphasis in original). By ensuring the visual cogency of everything from the furniture design, the display of objects to the signage, Willhelm transforms brand identity into a museum-quality exhibition. Yet, this is not the crass commercialization of Takashi Murakami's Louis Vuitton boutique-in-an-exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (2008). Instead, Willhelm and Kraus seamlessly incorporate their creative practice with commerce in more subtle ways; they fully embrace their function as fashion designers, but neither deny nor comply with the aims of the market. It is this quality that makes their work so indefinable and slippery. In the case of *Experts*, visitors are asked to confront such elusiveness, to question ways of seeing and make critical judgments. Along the way, they discover alternative perspectives, and more importantly, see the world in the way Willhelm does.

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COME CLOSER: ART AROUND THE BOWERY, 1969–1989

Curated by Ethan Swan, New Museum, New York, 19 September–30 December 2012

Reviewed by Andrew Wasserman, Stony Brook University

In the final chapter of his 1961 pop-sociological study of 'the Bowery Man', Elmer Bendiner projected possible environmental reforms of the Bowery as Skid Row. Alerting his reader to the social and material conditions of this Manhattan den of iniquities, Bendiner described the Bowery as both the site at which and the lens through which American culture is unflatteringly revealed. In answer to the question of what is to be done with this 'drunken street' – this 'insolent, mocking street' – Bendiner resignedly conceded, 'It must be destroyed, of course, and replaced with a sober, business-like, no-nonsense avenue' by those ready to 'cut thorough the street' and 'rebuild the avenue in brick and stone and steel' (Bendiner 1961: 182–83).

Sensing this inevitable transformation of the downtown zone, Bendiner cautions readers to not confuse the ability to construct a material community with the ability to construct a social community.

The New Museum's *Come Closer: Art Around the Bowery, 1969–1989* serves as an important opening gambit into a formal curatorial tracing of an under-considered cultural legacy within the intervening years between Bendiner's study and the commercial real-estate development that has taken hold of the region since the early 1990s. Organized by Ethan Swan, Education Associate at the New Museum, the exhibition draws upon resources of the museum's Bowery Artists Tribute and the archive of Mark H. Miller, owner of the website 98 Bowery: 1969–1989 – View from the Top Floor. The curator's wall text positions the exhibition as a showcase for artists responding to metropolitan neglect in housing maintenance and social services, conditions that bred a community of experimentation and permissiveness. Drawn downtown by the pull of an 'insurgent spirit', artists 'turned their attention towards the Bowery, inviting a re-examination of this neglected zone through their works'. Further examining this civic blind spot has been a considerable focus of the museum's programming since beginning operations in its new multi-storey statement building at 235 Bowery in 2007.

Upon arriving on Bowery, the museum established the Bowery Artist Tribute as a multi-platform archive and public education initiative, existing both as an online database and a series of publications. The goal has been to recover the Bowery's role within art historical chronologies over the previous half-century, linking developments in abstract expressionism, pop, minimalism, conceptualism, sound, performance and graffiti art to the New Museum's definition of what constitutes the Bowery (Phillips 2010). This historical supplementing sits alongside a geographic mapping of place. The Bowery Artist Tribute's database identifies locations of artists' residences and studios across a vast territory, encompassing sections of SoHo, Greenwich Village, the East Village, and the Lower East Side. The recent exhibition's title directive to 'come closer' demands not only a more intimate approach by the viewer to the works on view, but also a drawing together of these works to an institutionally claimed space.

Artifactual traces of places and actions dominate *Come Closer*, installed in the museum's asymmetrical U-shaped fifth-floor gallery. Most notable is the mid-gallery installation of the door from Keith Haring's studio at 325 Broome Street. Its red surface visible upon entering the gallery from the elevator bank, the door's exterior is marked with Haring's radiant baby frozen in mid-crawl above the door's peephole. Walking around to the other side reveals not only the overlapping graphics of guests of Haring – the 1980s tags of Fab Five Freddy, Futura 2000 and others – but also the overlapping cultural practices performed during the period. The exhibition uncovers artists' practices not only contained behind closed doors but rather those spilling out through studio doors, collapsing distinctions between spaces for art and for everyday life.

As forceful as the door's placement is in structuring an interaction with an element excavated from a historical object culture, less successful is an installation along the narrow corridor at the rear of the gallery. Easily missed by those not seeking the bathroom within the same hallway, flyers

Come Closer: Art Around the Bowery, 1969–1989 *(2012), installation views of poster corridor (above) and gallery with Keith Haring's door (below). Photos: Jesse Untracht-Oakner, courtesy of the New Museum, New York.*

are pasted to the walls. Alerts for concerts, readings and performances held at CBGB, ABC No Rio, Club 57, and the Franklin Furnace cover the walls. Freshly reproduced for the exhibition, the crisp pages neatly organized with minimal overlap, these announcements never betray the institutional setting in which they are being newly re-presented. This re-creation of a club's back hallway as an appropriated message board is a sanitized version of the original.

Miller's contribution to the show extends beyond the dates framing the exhibition, marking Miller's occupation of his Bowery apartment, and thus serving as an otherwise arbitrary exhibition range. Several of the works on view come from his own collection and are documents of his everyday world. For the latter, these include: *Harry Mason, Harry's Bar, 98 Bowery, NYC* (1974), nine captioned photographs of Harry Mason, the owner of the eponymous bar; *Write a Word* (1972), *Choose a Flower or a Gun* (1972), *Relating to the Opposite Sex* (1972), and *Describe Yourself* (1972), each a series of six black-and-white Polaroids of figures with chalkboards; and *Paparazzi Self-Portraits* (1975–78), photographs of Miller and Bettie Ringma posing with notable personalities from the era.

Beyond documentation in general, self-documentations feature prominently. Arturo Vega's *Photo-Booth Self Portraits* (*c.*1974) are set within the same display case as Miller's *Paparazzi Self-Portraits.* Vega's photo-booth strips, 24 frames in total, show the photographer wearing his Ramones T-shirt in all but one frame. Vega's T-shirt design for the Ramones' 1978 world tour hangs above the case, paired with another 1978 Vega-designed T-shirt. The Ramones loom large – both literally and metaphorically – over the exhibition, regional representatives of an association with a punk culture ethos. Two small drawings by Dee Dee Ramone and Joey Ramone, each from 1975, are displayed close to a large collaborative painting by Miller, Ringma and Curt Hoppe, *Bettie and the Ramones* (1978), the Ramones' autographs signed directly overhead their painted likenesses. John Holmstrom's *Death of Punk* (1980) illustrates the commercial co-option of punk. Shown is the clash of costumed tourists with authentic enthusiasts. The former groups stand outside of the Super-Hip New Wave Disco Supper Club to hear a diverse range of acts (among those given marquee billing are both Blondie and Wayne Newton) while the latter sit on the curb, scorned by the newly arrived cultural consumers.

The ephemeral nature of many projects presented in the exhibition restricts the objects available for display. Fragmentary remains of temporary installations and photographic documentation of performances are often all that survive of many original works. VHS cases for the MWF Video Club are displayed alongside photographs of performances at 5 Bleecker Street. Documents of Christy Rupp's *Rat Patrol* (1979/2001) serial installations appear twice in the exhibition's gallery: once as a VHS case of an artist's film and again as a photographic postcard in Collaborative Projects's spiral-bound *Greetings from NYC* (1985). Included as well are three Henry Wang photographs of Adam Purple's immense urban reclamation earthwork *The Garden of Eden* (1975–86). With its concentric rings offering locally grown produce and other flora, Purple's unsanctioned landscape was bulldozed in 1986 to make way for a housing

project. Absent from the exhibition is the location of Purple's garden: stretched over five vacant lots between Forsythe and Eldridge Streets, only two blocks away from the museum's Bowery building yet more often grouped in with the Lower East Side than a 'Bowery' district.

The exhibition plays fast and loose with where the Bowery is – or was – located. If Wang's photographs push the Bowery to the east, photographs and a video recording of Colette Lumiere's performances from *Justine of the Colette is Dead Co./Reverse Pop* (1978–82) push the territory six blocks to the west. The work on view highlights Lumiere's occupation of the storefront window of Record City on Broadway. In so doing, the exhibit narrows a project with a significant scope, with performances occurring in clubs and storefronts throughout not just SoHo and the Lower East Side but internationally as well. The vague definition of place carries through the four photographs recording Marcia Resnick's *Canyon Curb Piece* (1974). Resnick's affixing of panoramic photographs of the Grand Canyon landscape to curbs is broadly identified as installed within Lower Manhattan. The video transfers of Charles Simonds's *Dwellings* (1972) and *Dwellings Winter* (1974) show the artist's networked clay micro-settlements built along curbs and building facades throughout Manhattan. The word 'Bowery' is absent from Simonds's narration.

Geographic revisionism in and of itself is neither problematic nor should be dismissed as an unreasonable institutional objective. However, sensitivity to the places implicated in this spatial rewriting is required. This includes taking stock of not just the original locations of installations or referenced sites. It also entails considering the museum's own place – in terms of geography and institutional status – as both map-maker and rebuilder through the presentation of works. In constructing an object-based historical narrative for the Bowery, the museum needs to be careful, *pace* Bendiner, not to engage in overly simple or limitedly critical curation of the broadly defined community to which it now finds itself a part.

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