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HANS SCHABUS

Der lange Morgen

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opening speech by Séamus Kealy, Director, Salzburger Kunstverein

Every life is in many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves. – James Joyce. Ulysses.

Hans Schabus makes artworks that curiously play with his experiences of the cosmos. His own surroundings are often referenced when he builds ideas out of scant or quotidian materials. Like a possessed madman, he has dug massive holes under his studio, burrowed under museums to make new passages for visitors, sailed on a self-made boat through underground tunnels, cycled around and through massive tracts of land, and in 2005, he transformed the Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennale into a wooden, labyrinthine mountain. Curiously, all of these laborious endeavors, each with a seeming beginning and end on offer, in fact, led to nowhere really. This element of a journey or passage to somewhere else is foiled, somewhat deliberately, often by the exhausting impossibility and weight of the context that Hans imposes on his work, or by a deliberate repetition that undercuts a sense of novelty in the experience. Having gone nowhere, or rather done a circuit that must only return upon itself, something has however been done.

One could say that Hans often makes something out of nothing. There are works by Hans Schabus that arise out of these self-imposed barriers or negatives, or they might, as in recent work, arise out from the unseen, the unrealized or the neglected. This might be a negative space, such as his stubborn tendency to dig holes, or to keep returning to the empty space of his studio as a muse, and now, employing the spectrality of non-existent events and the “cancelled-out.” We have all experienced this recently. ABGESAGT! GECANCELLED! CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE! DUE TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THERE WILL BE NO NEW POSITIONS CREATED. PUB CLOSED FOR SERVICE.

Here are imposed conditions again ... and it seems they did indeed tempt Hans to make some sort of intervention. Didn't we all think we might do something new, bold and productive during the pandemic? Then, for most of us ... the great majority of us .. myself included, nothing or almost nothing arose. Or we were unable to apply ourselves to something new when given the opportunity? Of course there were exceptions. Some of you might be smirking now because there is a plentiful garden in your backyard or your mind has developed to take in a new language. There is surely someone among us who became a mathematical genius over the last year. In my case, I made three paintings. Over that year. I probably could have made thirty. Well for Hans, he had the same conundrum, in facing absences from the familiar world. We can say that there was a kind of nothing that he confronted, but out of the nothing arose something. Let me return to this when discussing the artwork in this exhibition. In the meantime, I hope to explain this paradox of something emerging from nothing by using one phrase that I recently said to Hans in his studio. I believe that he liked this. This was:

Hans fucks around with things.¹

And in this case, he fucks around with non-things too. There is a simplicity and everyday elegance to Hans Schabus' work that I have come to admire now over about, ahem, 18 years of knowing the man and his work. Without getting too nostalgic, you might permit me to say that our paths have crossed

¹ This should not be translated.

professionally several times over these years. Naturally it would be my tendency over these years to come up with a common thread to his work. And I have, I just said it, I hope you can bear with me:

Hans fucks around with things.

There is nothing pejorative in this statement. I might venture to say that Samuel Beckett was also an artist who fucked around with things. I might not get out of a Beckett conference in one piece repeating this claim (and maybe I won't get out of this gallery in one piece) but if we consider it, we can state, that out of a seeming nothing, Beckett made a few elegant gestures combined with minimal conditions to produce profound literature and theatre. This inventiveness with bare bones and dust is for me astonishing and awe-inspiring.

Let's start with my first encounter with Hans' work, when he mounted his show *Astronaut (Komme gleich)* at Secession in 2003. I pitched an article about this show to Flash Art Magazine and thus wrote my first text for them about Hans' work. Hans's exhibition, titled *Astronaut*, was about, essentially, trying to escape Vienna, either in a self-made boat under Vienna's sewers (in Western, the brilliant film parody of *The Third Man*) or by venturing through a hallway semi-excavated in the Secession building itself. There was something haunting about this work, but also outrageous.

You see, the artist-cum-astronaut doesn't get out. This mission goes awry. Or does it? He's on his way, *komme gleich*, he says, but then he only just comes back to where he started. It seems a bit pointless but he does it regardless. It is as if he cannot help himself. Did you not also wonder about his bicycle journeys through America or now more recently during the pandemic from the very most northern to the very most southern parts of continental Europe? What is he up to? We might say that he is spinning his work out of this seemingly, deceptively banal engagement with the barest of reality. I mean, look at the video he has made, it is not thrilling. Of course I do not mean to assert that this work is boring or to cycle across a continent in banal. No, this is a grand gesture. But the *how* of this becoming an artwork could be interpreted as dry and banal. In his case, it does not – although coming dangerously close.

Let me explain, by again going back briefly to another unit of time.

In 2016, we presented his exhibition *The Long Road from Tall Trees to Tall Houses* in the Salzburger Kunstverein. This exhibition charted, day by day, his 42 day cycle route from California (where there were the tall trees) to New York city (where there were the tall houses). A series of pictures were presented throughout the gallery, each one having a postcard and a photo of Hans in a hotel room from each of his stops. Sometimes we are staring at his thick, hairy calves and swollen, smelly feet from the POV of his bed. On his blog for this journey and project, he concludes with the statement: *The Long Road from Tall Trees to Tall Houses* turned out to be: distance: 5.352 km / 3.325 mi, elevation gain: 36.490 hm / 119.717 ft. It seems all so logical or mechanical. But no, there is something further here. When planning his exhibition of this work, for example, he said to me: Séamus, I'd like to bore a huge fucking hole right through that concrete gallery wall into the hallway.

I paused for a few seconds. And then I said ok let's do it.

If this isn't fucking around with things, I don't know what else it is. Of course, there are gestures at work here. It wasn't that Hans and I had too many beers together and at the end of the night, I said, yeah Hans, great, fuck it, let's just carve out a huge circular hole out of the historic building ... for the hell of it. No, I trusted what he was up to. Here he was connecting the inner and outer spaces of the gallery, as a continuation of his journey. Time and space were continually being engaged with even in the exhibition itself. They were still moving, maybe catching up with him as they had traveled behind him, and were not to be paused or pinned down in the context of an exhibition, although to be an acknowledged determining factor. His tendency to inscribe time into units underlines this gesture. Something still had to have the element of being able to escape or move in and out of the exhibition. Hans was re-working found material. The material is, of course, the time and space of his journey. Hans' project was actually by its very nature an enquiry into being and time. This is profound artwork in its very simplicity. But the "fucking around" part of this work is what makes the work pulsate. I say this, because, in fact, there is always this danger that Hans' work or artwork by someone else with similar tactics will make work that resembles its material so closely as to disappear. We've all seen

that in contemporary art spaces, right? It's the fucking around part In English we would also say, the "messaging with our heads" element ... this is what gives his work a charge. I felt this charge the first time I saw his work at Secession, and it was confirmed when I met Hans then and interviewed him. Then it was re-confirmed when I invited him to Canada, twice, to present his work there too. Then again in Salzburg. And now again, this charge is present in this exhibition here in the beautiful Krinzinger gallery.

So where does that take us with his new work?

A summary: Pandemic happens. We are all, mostly, isolated from one another. Some take up new activities. Many watch tv. Many others suffer as the global economy slows dramatically. Some die from Covid, many others die within worsened, insufferable conditions. A small minority profit, greatly. Another minority, larger, find time to deepen their individualism by pursuing new activities. Another eccentric minority expands its belief in mad ideas. Many others pull together to support one another. Pandemic waxes and wanes, improves in some places, worsens in other places, remains persistent where resources are low. We are still within it all.

There were and continue to be great waves of suffering. There was a divide and there was a renewal due to the pandemic. There were those who made nothing of it. There were those who made something of the nothing of it. Hans is one of them.

One item from the summary above remains: Events are cancelled. Empty stages.

I can tell you that in Ireland this was particularly hard. There were no legal gigs for 18 months. Pubs without music are like rivers without fish.

The non-happening of these events – this absence in terms of space, time and experience – is one of the materials he employs in this exhibition. One might think here of a disappearing act repeated like a broken record or a glitch in time. Alongside this are the associations and memories we might have when, not only we reminisce on when we saw live music last, but more so we come across the references Hans plays with: the kinky-kitsch apocalypse of Iron Maiden (apocalypse is cancelled, lads!), Dua-Lipa's future-nostalgia tour (an ironic twist on an already groovy but confusing irony), and of course Guns N' Roses (welcome to the jungle baby), Pet Shop Boys, and Patti Smith, all this nostalgic music that never goes away, can never go away, is sliced apart and put back together. There is a kind of visual wordplay in his disassembling and re-assembling of these posters, comprised of pop cultural associations, our individual and collective memories and experiences, and our individual and collective forgetting. The work is fueled by the non-happening of these events, like individual forms of time travel in the mind, or a sudden eruption into a parallel universe made of fragments of different lost or possible time.

And then he presents a stage for us, made out of these posters, or rather templates of the posters. This is why sometimes we see straightforward text, sometimes mirrored text or sometimes mirrored and upside down text. Hans is using the mechanisms of poster fabrication as they present themselves. Figures made from these aluminum templates and the scaffolding of the stage gear appear, like awkward ghosts echoing the non-existent crowds. When I saw this stage, it immediately reminded me of an outdoor sculpture made for Nuit Blanche in Toronto in 2008 by the artist Kristan Horton. Nuit Blanche is the equivalent of Lange Nacht den Museen. From afar, one could hear a crowd cheering, sometimes jeering, and as one approached, one could see the flood lights and a large outdoor stage apparatus set up. But then, there was no one there. The sound blasting through the speakers was a pre-recorded crowd chanting. Kristan was clearly parodying the spectacle of Nuit Blanche (which boasts up to 1 Million visitors in a night) in this tautological kind of presentation of a stage in the dark that we gather to in excitement to observe, only to realize we have been tricked. Hans is also concerned with this aspect of spectacle and meaninglessness, although perhaps less pointedly. He leaves this for us to consider, and for us to consider ideas of the "new normal" or "return to the good old days" that are floating around, especially in regard to arts and entertainment. Perhaps he is suggesting we should be again wary of the danger of spectacle coming to replace more contemplative pursuits. We can ask him later over a beer.

I would lastly mention the stuck sliding garage door. Shut the Fuck Down, I believe it is called, and the coincidence of my use of the F-word earlier seems justified. Hans has made a copy of the sliding door

to his studio and brought it as an intervention into the elegant architecture of this beautiful gallery. For one, it is another reminder that we are presented ruminations on the universe from the swivel-joint of Hans Schabus. That is, the universe spirals out from him, here again announced by his reference, once again, back to his studio. However rather than explicitly being an egotistical or solipsistic experience, this is more of a collective, *jedermensch* gesture of sharing, as we are invited along his journey and we are not instructed by Hans about what it all means. He does the ground work, sometimes quite dizzying actually, and we can tag along as we please.

One of my favourite aspects of Hans' work is its accessibility. This is certainly echoed in his quirky use of this semi-industrial garage door in this exhibition. Hans' work, in its presence, in its resemblance and echoing of the everyday, offers us a poetic view on our shared perceptions; what has happened, and what has not, although could have, and what is now before us.

Hans Schabus (born 1970 in Watschnig, Austria) lives and works in Vienna.

1991–1996 studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, since 2014 professor of sculpture and spatial design at the University of Applied Arts Vienna.

Selection of individual and group shows: Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Rupertinum, Salzburg, AT (2019) group show, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Wien, AT (2018) GA, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, AT, (2018), group show, *Cafe Hansi (Aufstellung)*, mumok – museum moderner kunst stiftung ludwig, Vienna, AT (2017), solo show, *The Long Road from Tall Trees to Tall Houses*, curated by León Krempel, Kunsthalle, Darmstadt, DE (2017), solo show, and at the Salzburger Kunstverein curated by Séamus Kealy, Salzburg, AT, (2016), solo show, *Vertikale Anstrengung*, curated by Bettina Steinbrügge, Belvedere 21, Vienna, AT, (2012), solo show, *Daily Mirror*, curated by Ursula Krinzinger, One World Foundation, Ahungalla / LK (2012), *Next Time I'm Here I'll Be There*, curated by Francesco Manacorda, Barbican / The Curve, London, GB (2008), solo show, *Revolutions – Forms that Turn*, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Biennale of Sydney, AU (2008), solo show, *Innere Sicherheit*, curated by Bernhard Balkenhol, Kasseler Kunstverein, Kassel, DE (2006), solo show, *Das letzte Land*, curated by Max Hollein, La Biennale di Venezia, 51. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, Austrian Pavilion, Venice, IT (2005), solo show, *Das Rendezvousproblem*, curated by Eckhard Schneider, Kunsthaus, Bregenz, Bregenz, AT (2004), solo show, *Transport*, curated by Harald Uhr, Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, DE (2003), solo show, *Astronaut (komme gleich)*, Secession, Vienna, AT (2003), solo show; **Exhibitions at Galerie Krinzinger:** *Bruno Gironcoli, Hans Schabus, NÄCHSTE TÜRE LÄUTEN! (ring the bell next door)* Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna AT (2018), solo show, *AiR Sri Lanka*, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna, AT (2012), group show, *Joint Venture*, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna, AT (1996), group show; **Awards:** International Video Art Prize, Hamburg, DE (2011), Arnold Bode Award, Kassel, DE (2006), Fine Arts Award of the City of Vienna, Vienna, AT (2006), Kardinal König Art Award (First Laureate), Salzburg, AT (2005), Professor Hilde Goldschmidt Award, Kitzbühel, AT (2001)