

## Exhibitions

## Somewhere in Between: Contemporary Scenes in Europe

**Bozar** Brussels 20 June to 19 August

I hesitate to refer to 'Somewhere in Between' as an exhibition. It was a collection of distinct displays organised by independent spaces in Brussels, a research project with the ambition to map alternative art spaces across Europe, a student assignment and an archive of artist publications. It was all these things and more. It seems appropriate that this heterogeneous group of curatorial projects without a clear overall theme or identity was presented in Brussels, the capital of a country in which diverse linguistic and geographical regions are sutured together under a precarious federal system. For some, Brussels is a dainty European capital; for others, it is a metonym for the problematic international politics of our era, functioning as a front for the diplomatic games played out in the headquarters of the European Union and Commission, NATO and other international organisations based in the city.

'Somewhere in Between' sprawled across 15 or so galleries in Bozar, an institution that has for the past couple of decades devoted a substantial part of its programme to serious, ambitious and risky projects about the status and meaning of Belgium and the European project. It opened with displays curated by three of Brussels' best-known independent initiatives: Etablissement d'en face, La Loge and Komplot, which were each asked to offer a perspective on their professional and artistic networks within Europe. They were given the freedom to curate and install their shows in their own house style, with support from Bozar's production team.

Since being set up by artists in 1991, Etablissement d'en face has occupied various spaces across the city, and is now based in a former shop across the street from Bozar. It presented 'Tutti



**Life Sport**  
*Athens Sweets 2018*

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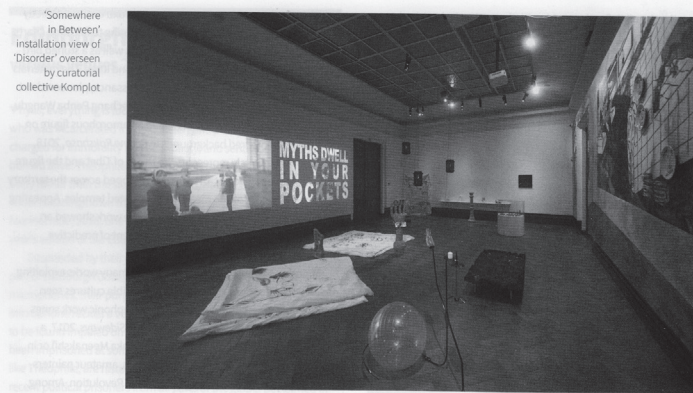
Fraut), a lot of first shows that displayed the space's trademark erudite absurdism. First up was Norwegian artist Steinar Hage Kisternesens 'Brown Period,' a tightly packed collection of sculptures on cardboard planks surrounded by paintings and chunky brown tapestries hanging from the ceiling. The installation poked fun at Modernism's obsession with colour-coding the phases of its genres by categorising the artist's recent production in 'bathetic brown.' Life Sport's 'Athens Sweat's' display acted as a minimalist merchandising point for its basic grey sweatpants – zipped up with an embroidered green palm tree – which can be ordered from the art space's leisurewear brand's online store. The installation was completed with documentary footage of people going about their business in the museum's courtyard, and a series of featured paintings and collages by Abel Auer, a former Brussels resident who now lives in Stuttgart. A new hallucinating triptych depicting scenes from the history of Europe, real and imagined, featured a Euro-Mondriam Rushmore with the faces of illustrious thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Otto von Karck carved into the rock.

La Loge, a space for contemporary art, architecture and

theory, which has occupied a former masonic lodge in the belles neighbourhood since 2012, used the Bozar project to develop 'LOOK', a series of publications that reimagines the exhibition space as printed matter. The first issue, 'Lodged-in-Voices', includes contributions by Hanne Lippard and Andreas Angelidakis commissioned in response to Bozar's activities, in particular its ambition to map a European scene and its tendency towards institutional critique.

The curatorial collective Komplot, founded in 2002, invited curators from Belgium, Sardinia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to collaborate on a show. 'Disorder' featured work by 23 artists, many based in Brussels but a good number from the curators' home countries. In the gallery guide, Komplot defines 'the art of curating as an emancipation tool, creating a rupture from what could be associated with a productivist school of art'. In the spirit of anti-consumerism, the curatorial team conceived of the space

as a 'living room', with several sculptures evoking furniture, for example Arnaud Eubelen's 'couch', a burned-out layer of foam covered in wire mesh, which looks like a Mies van der Rohe Barcelona daybed after a house fire. For me, the designation 'living room' was more a reference to the life energy brought by so many curators and artists from different places collaborating on a single presentation. The branching red threads and many-handed creatures in Jaakko Brannasvuo and Viktor Timofeev's wall painting *Flowcharts for Labradoroodles*, 2018, a vast, exquisite



corpse rendered in multiple dimensions, seemed to signal the mass-collaborative endeavour of the show.

Walking through the suite of galleries at Bozar offered a flavour of each independent space's *modus operandi*, taste and style.

designed by Art Nouveau architect Victor Horta and inaugurated in 1928 as the Palais des beaux-arts, Bazar functions as a temporary exhibition and event venue, a counterpoint to the permanent displays at the Museums of Fine Art and History up the hill on the Mont des Arts. In 2003 it was rebranded as Bazar, a new coinage that is also a homophone of 'beaux-arts,' in a bid to reflect the local multilingualism, but in the end this attempt to evade linguistic specificity reads as another symptom of Belgium's unsettled identity, which 'Somewhere in Between' performs on a grand scale.

The largest of the galleries used for 'Somewhere in Between' was handed over to curatorial students from KASK School of Arts in Ghent, who presented a series of projects made in response to a mapping assignment. Some mapped close to home, like Maaikie Descendre and Eva Dobbels, who produced *The Absolute Objective Map* of emerging art spaces in Ghent. Others took the mapping

The non-hierarchical approach of 'Somewhere in Between', which was intriguing up to that point, raising as it did provocative questions about independence, survival and collaboration in contemporary art, seemed misappalled in the levelling of 'Orient' with everything else. And it was a fascinating show: Novotný offered a glimpse of the grassroots networks in operation in eastern Europe from the 1980s through to the present day with works by 47 artists.

As its title suggested, 'Somewhere in Between' didn't exactly know where it wanted to be, or, for that matter, what it was. Its inability to define itself made for unusual and sometimes iconoclastic juxtapositions of curatorial methodologies and artistic approaches, giving it a chaotic energy that had moments of joyful anarchy. Ultimately, however, the project as a whole felt as unwieldy and frustrating as the notion of Europe. ■

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## 2nd Yinchuan Biennale: Starting from the Desert

**MOCA** 9 June to 19 September

Chairman Mao's ambition was for a union of autonomous localities spreading from China across Asia, Europe and Africa. In reinventing this 'Comintern' dream, President Xi's 'Belt and Road' policy insists on 'peoples' joint enjoyment of the fruits of development, sharing prosperity, connectivity and infrastructure. Yinchuan is a historic node of the Silk Road and the Biennale is seen as an opportunity to focus on trading viewpoints and linking artists from East to West – a cultural superstructure for ports, roads, rail tracks and détente.

The setting is billed as China's most western art museum; it is a long trek to the next, probably at Bishkek or Islamabad. It is a long way from the city centre, too, via a broad new road traversing virgin outskirts, rent with incomplete civil engineering. Not going anywhere much else for the present, the route suggests a processionary way leading only to the museum complex, which includes an artists' village, unoccupied on the day of this visit, and

## ZHOOZHED, ZHUZH, TSZUJED CAPS LOCKY CRITICISM!

The exhibition review above doesn't succeed in establishing whether 'tightly packed sculptures on cardboard plinths' and 'chunky brown wool tapestries hung from ceilings' constitutes a 'house style', 'risky', 'serious', 'ambitious' 'avant garde art' or 'an ambition to map a European scene'. But it does, in mentioning that the exhibition contains references to Schopenhauer, without wondering why, reproduce the likely intention of the artist that all this is somehow, in some way or other clever like philosophy. It appears that projects so cosmetically and heavily branded in theoretical discharge such as the one reviewed immediately undermine any criticism, the critic scared that they may lack the cognitive ability to comprehend such profundities.

Beyond the flaccidly descriptive the text barely even manages to register a more or less sophisticated grunt of approval or disapproval. It is not informed by anything like a position, nor is it in anyway informative; it does function as a demonstration of the fact that if your generalisations are big enough and the area from which you take your view is wide enough and diverse enough criticism is almost entirely replaced by descriptive dross. The lame device of the pay off of the last paragraph having been set up by an unsubstantiated erroneous first paragraph is not good enough. Arguably, the twelve words 'the project felt... as unwieldy and frustrating as the notion of Europe' might have sufficed for the review but word count to the reviewer is like the rowing machine in the bedroom for the adulterer; the lips, cheeks, eyelids and anuses for the sausage maker; and froth to the brewer. (collaterally generated by-product.) Equivalent meaningless sentences such as 'this object feels as complex as other unrelated complex things in the world', 'these words appear as deep and profound as is the idea of deep and profound in fishing' and 'A Paycheck Lyncher Jeers Offer = A Perchance Lechery Jerky Offs' might be offered as stand-ins.

The production of arthood is based on a plurality of styles and ever greater internal complexity that manifests itself as differences in style or appearance. Changes of style do not indicate differences that can be qualified beyond statements of preference. Difficulty or lack of clarity doesn't constitute good. Every work of arthood may strive to be good but there is no possibility of being better, only superficially different. Style in this sense is an endless infinitely conceivable quantity, that allows only the work of art to operate avantgardistically, which means nothing other than reproducing more of the same, in the absence of an avant garde.

Starting from a twofold point of view that there are no unique artistic values that transcend the art system's boundaries, no transcendental quality no matter how heavily it implies meaning while refraining from committing the substance of what is meant; and that criticality in art engages at no significant point with any substantive wider social content: from this position how does one go about maintaining an art practice that wants to function critically in such conditions?

Criticism, in the established sense of critique as external fault-finding or judgements made looking from outside in, offering something resembling objectivity or more or less judgement validated by further statements, can only operate as mere subjective affirmation of assured statements in the form of artworks when artistic production itself constitutes a problem. The fallacy of 'projecting' the effect and making it a quality of its cause tends to recur. So-called expert or specialised intervention (the conspicuous distinction between initiate and ignorant in art) only diminishes the potential of criticism. Criticism in the entirely honorific sense of what is hubristically termed 'critical art practice' regularly operates as being part of the problem of art and not part of a provisional solution to the problem of how to go about maintaining an art practice within the context of late-capitalism; this form of criticism currently only contributes to the understanding that no such problem exists.

Criticism has ended up as nothing more substantial than a handful of individuals commenting and sanctioning each other's output, it has been subsumed into the practices' of arthood as a public relations exercise or insider-job of self-aggrandisement, a necessity in any significant institutional enterprise. Criticism as it now exists as a thickening agent for arthood engages with no substantive social context. As a form of discourse it is almost entirely self-validating and self-producing. Critical art practices have not functioned as such operationally, because they have been active in reproducing the dominant conditions of artistic production, which is far from critical. If artists themselves consider criticism in terms of a distinct specialism, then consequently a lack of potential to carry out a critical practice is normalised and accepted, as it is in texts such as this.

Therefore, we shall make a clean distinction and state that this review is as functionally feckless as it is operationally hubristic. The text fails to contribute to the formulation of a criteria for what constitutes art, or what constitutes good or better or worse or poor art, and any justification as to why. Not even a 'tentative resolution' is attempted. Why can't texts such as this declare a judgement and attempt to substantiate the judgement with statements of explanation or clarification? What exactly is at risk? If we take it that for the text to be operationally critical it must distinguish itself from its object; this can only be done by being critical, which can only be done by being distinct. In the apathetic state of arthood an attempt, at the very least, may have been productive. Because an attempt at a tentative resolution would itself constitute a criterion for a judgement of quality, even if the question of defining a notion of art is ignored beyond the assumption that something is art.

Jeffrey Charles Henry Peacock  
November 2018





"I think we've gone totally public sculpture mad, I hate public sculpture. It's really a problem, I've got to say it's really a problem. Public sculpture ... oh God, even the phrase makes me feel tired. Why I am engaged in it? Well, I think, as a sculptor, that is something of one's lot."

"You can't make art for other people. You can't make art for an audience. I think the challenges that one has as an artist are with one's self... If it works for me, it'll work for you."

"The work itself has a complete circle of meaning and counterpoint. And without your involvement as a viewer, there is no story."

# NEW BAD GOODS