

GALERIE TSCHUDI

BETHAN HUWS

22 December 2018 to 23 March 2019

Bethan Huws' studio in Berlin is like a research laboratory, equally concerned with material and immaterial matter. When I visited her this summer, the studio's big central tables were covered in pebbles, as if a river had just flowed through the space, leaving half of the riverbed behind. In equal density, notes, clippings, and images devoted to a seemingly endless number of art- historical and linguistic investigations populated the studio walls.

Some of those investigations, as if endowed with special urgency, were moved to the foreground, inhabiting the central space on movable panels and forming different constellations. On one of those panels, Post-its and handwritten notes devoted to issues of longitude and latitude surrounded Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) and Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés* (1946–66). On another panel, a photographic portrait of Duchamp by Man Ray was grouped with two historical self-portraits; Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten By a Lizard* (1594–95), and Courbet's *The Desperate Man* (1843–45), with detailed notes on the madness and desperation expressed by the hands and eyes of these three great men.

The visual pairings and iconographic lineages evoked in those research panels were of an astute and unprecedented nature, and the notes that accompanied them testified to Huws' astounding capacity for analytic and synthetic thinking. Eagerly absorbing all of this information, I was humbled in my own art-historical knowledge and visual memory. And while searching for touchstones, I realized that I had not only maneuvered myself right into a sweeping avalanche of thoughts, but was also surrounded by what could be the remnants of a more literal avalanche: hundreds of pebbles.

Art's power to communicate and create meaning, over time and in a given moment, is at the core of Bethan Huws' multifaceted production, which encompasses performances, installation-based work, moving image, sculpture, drawing, and writing. Continually evolving around notions of understanding and questions of meaning, Huws dissects and reads the past, in order to evaluate the validity and potential pertinence of its concepts. About twenty years ago, after Huws saw Duchamp's seminal *Fountain* (1917) in Rome, she started to put his work at the center of her investigations. Since then, Duchamp has become the barometer for thinking about artistic ideas, his as much as hers. Bouncing back and forth between reflection and production, Huws approaches the concept of the readymade in a variety of ways, sometimes reflecting on it, and at other times adopting it. While research is undoubtedly the *raison d'être* of Huws' practice, her art does not aim at immediate comprehensibility or at the transmission of didactic content. Instead, her associative and generously welcoming work is inherently close to life and full of affect and humor.

The opening sentence of Huws' exhibition here at Galerie Tschudi asks "*Où sont les toilettes, s'il vous plaît?*" (2018). Situated right at the entrance of the gallery and around the corner from the bathroom, this seemingly polite and banal question of where to find the toilets is materialized in bright neon tubing. Considering the setting, at the entrance of an art exhibition, this question's strange familiarity quickly turns into something else. According to Huws, there is only one toilet in art history, and it's a man's toilet at that: Marcel Duchamp's. On the other side of the hallway, we encounter *Carotte de tabac* (2018), a sculpture consisting of a doubled conic structure made out of copper, with a red, glowing neon tube twisting around it like a snake around a branch. The work's title indicates the form's origins: a 'carotte de tabac' is the name given to the sign that commonly hangs outside tobacconists' shops in France. There are many tobacco-related subjects in Duchamp's works, a matter which might indeed go back to the etymological meaning of the word 'esprit'.

In a room on the ground floor of the gallery, three word pairs and a single term are rendered in transparent 'neon' tubes, filled with argon gas: *Recognition/Realisation*, *Surface/Depth*, *Extra/Ordinary*, and *An Artist* (2018). The first two sets of words are directly concerned with Huws' working method: After recognizing something with her senses – a form, for example – she subsequently tries to articulate what she recognizes. Recognition, then, turns into realization. And through layering, overlapping, and connecting the phenomena that surface in her mind, she achieves depth in her work. Extra/Ordinary, on the other hand, expresses a desire to understand nature, human nature, in its specificity: to be extraordinary, that is, to be (more than) ordinary. And what, then, is An Artist? This work is based on Huws' reading of something Marcel Duchamp said in an interview with Richard Hamilton in 1959. While Hamilton proposes to frame Duchamp as the "anti-artist", Duchamp insists

GALERIE TSCHUDI

on being “an artist”. To Huws, this suggests that Duchamp positioned himself as an individual artist, thereby underlining what he had stressed all his life: the revolutionary power of the individual.¹

Reason (or Winter) (2018) is an acrylic globe, whose substructure is hidden underneath a mysterious black skirt. The globe is filled with water, polystyrene flakes, and a white ceramic object. Together, these ‘ingredients’ constitute a spectacle: amidst a whirling snowstorm, there is a urinal, spinning. The first time I saw this astonishing piece I could not quite decide whether the urinal looked like a white racing car in a winter landscape, or like the holy spirit in person.

On a purely visual or formal level, with both the urinal and the snow being white, this piece conveys an experience of the sublime. In addition, there is a distinct reference to popular culture: both the urinal and the souvenir snow globe are popular objects, thus accentuating Duchamp’s ‘reconciliation of art and the people’.² With a white ceramic urinal contained in it, *Reason (or Winter)*’s most explicit reference is of course to Duchamp’s seminal *Fountain* (1917). Yet the piece also pays homage to a myriad of other works by Duchamp that either implicitly or explicitly reference snow or winter. Might the snowstorm in *Reason (or Winter)* possibly be a brainstorm?

On the gallery’s first floor, we encounter seven panels composed of Huws’ *Research Notes* (2007–14). This selection of *Research Notes*, originally contained in a publication of more than 600 pages, exemplarily demonstrates the distinguished nature of Huws’ cumulative process of investigation: It is a personal reading of Duchamp’s work that posits that there is more to Duchamp than the manifest. It is a reading enacted by an ‘artist-accomplice’ who sees a deep structure of countless references to be decoded.³

La chaleur d’un siège (qui vient d’être quitté) est infra-mince. Or After Eight (the heat emitted from a seat (that has just been vacated) is infra-mince) (2018) is a good example of how Huws humorously and eloquently develops Duchamp’s thoughts. Here, Huws proposes another version of the “infra-mince”.⁴ Taking its form from a museum bench which sits three, the proportion, colors, and typography of this sculpture correspond to the British After Eight chocolate box. As Huws remembers: “Growing up, it was dead fashionable to eat those chocolates, especially at the end of a dinner in a restaurant.” Not only are these chocolates ‘very thin’ (infra-mince), at the time of their invention, in 1962, they were indeed the thinnest chocolates in Britain. Transforming this symbol of sophistication into a seating opportunity for the visitors of her exhibition, and equipping it with a very thin cushion – its dark brown color corresponding to the paper sleeves that the individual After Eight chocolates are wrapped in – Huws presents her own version of the “infra-mince”.

In the former haystack of the gallery building, we encounter eight sculptural works of a haptic nature. Materialized in either concrete or plaster, these works are characterized by a subdued color palette, and together comprise a setting in which cool realism merges with austere surrealism.

3 Steps (2018) is a minimalistic sculpture cast in gray concrete. The three free-standing steps that together comprise the sculpture are a celebration of a seminal moment in art history. As Huws notes: “The turning point for Marcel Duchamp was on Monday the 18th of March, 1912.” On this historical day, Duchamp was informed that the members of the hanging committee at the Salon des Indépendants thought his painting *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912), destined for the Cubist room, had “too much of a literary title”.

The work immediately following *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* in Duchamp’s catalogue raisonné is a drawing of a standing female nude.⁵ Apart from the conventional nature of this nude, which is neither Cubist nor Futurist, what is remarkable is the strange gesture that she makes with her right hand: Her index finger and thumb are held apart, as if she was holding something invisible, and the contours of her hand are distinctly angular. Now, Huws realizes something unusual: This gesture is “reminiscent of a vernier caliper, those devices used to measure the diameter or thickness of an object, or, in real terms, something’s depth: a work of art for instance.” Modelled from real life, and meticulously realized in plaster, Huws’ *Standing Nude April 1912* (2018) adopts the same posture as the figure in Duchamp’s drawing.

¹ Please note that the individual artist, in his singularity, is opposed to the group of artists, in their plurality (such as the Cubists, Dadaists, Surrealists, etc.).

² The potential ‘reconciliation of art and the people’ in the work of Duchamp was prophesied by Guillaume Apollinaire.

³ The beautiful term “artist-accomplice” is taken from Hans Rudolf Reust’s essay “Reading Duchamp”, as published in: *Bethan Huws. Research Notes*. Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, and Paris: Dieter Association (2014).

⁴ The “infra-mince”, a term coined by Duchamp, is a moment of intense liminality, an in-betweenness so ineluctable that it exists as a state in which its component parts are inseparable. Examples for an “infra-mince” are: the sound of two legs rubbing against each other, or the smell that is produced when tobacco smoke smells also of the mouth from which it comes.

⁵ Please note the nude correspondence in both works.

GALERIE TSCHUDI

Reflecting on a very specific and truly mysterious detail that recurrently appears in paintings by Lucas Cranach, especially in the ones depicting either Lucretia or Venus, Huws crafted a surreal and utterly haptic work of art: a series of six large cement panels with hundreds of pebbles embedded in them.⁶ *After Lucas Cranach (detail) or like the surface of the moon* (2018) takes the austere, highly stylized ground that these nude and barefoot female figures inhabit as its starting point. By extrapolating this specific detail – an abstract space reminiscent of a moonscape – Huws accentuates the abstract quality inherent in many paintings by Cranach. This tendency to question the ground on which something rests is indeed most characteristic for Huws.

Huws' word vitrines are a place for statements or comments, a space of liberty where humor and contradiction can live together. Presented on the wall like paintings, these two-dimensional works are composed of black showcases with white plastic letters, just like the information boards typically used in administrative contexts to communicate information to the public. Here, at Galerie Tschudi, we read: *Discourse not intercourse* (2001/18). Embedded in another vitrine is written: *We may not know the intention, but we certainly feel it* (2012/18).

While most of Huws' vitrines contain brief statements, some of them are of more extensive character: In *Untitled (The Pheasant)* (2005/18), Huws embarks on a poetic and surrealist description of a pheasant climbing up Mount Pleasant. Following a chorus repeated three times about the kindness of these pheasants, somebody abruptly interrupts: "Have you finished?". "And it wasn't even Christmas." What happened? With Christmas around the corner, I suddenly found myself worrying about whether or not the pheasant was killed for supper. But perhaps that's just me, a middle-class Swiss person, fantasizing about British traditions.

Giorgia von Albertini

⁶ Undoubtedly, this is where all the pebbles went.