

One Man's Mess Is Another Man's Masterpiece

Aaron Schuster on Pierre Bismuth's exhibition

BRUSSELS, 21 SEPT- The gallery started the new season last September with an exhibition of recent works by Pierre Bismuth.

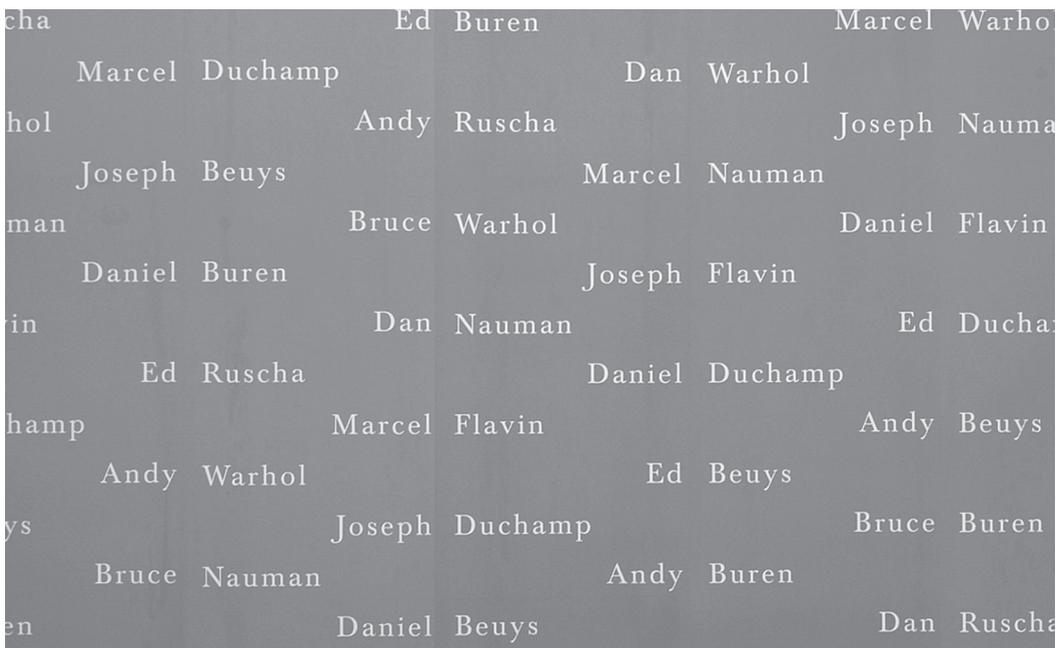
In *Today Is The Tomorrow of Yesterday* celebrity magazine covers are treated as precious fragments from a long lost civilization. The artist-archaeologist reconstructs, as it were, selected documents of pop culture as if they were shards of ancient pottery. The completed collages, with their cracks and gaps and off-center placement, bear the traces of this mock restoration process. The title of the work derives from a scene from Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry*, where a confused little boy delivers an accidental witticism about time, a clever sounding tautology about 'when today is'. Bismuth's ironic archaeol-

ogy gives an uncanny depth to the flat pop culture present, transforming the immediacy of the tabloid now into an eternal moment of nostalgia and memory. One can also detect in the artist's procedure a reference to the décollage work of Jacques Villeglé, Raymond Hains, and Mino Rotella, with their lacerated poster aesthetic.

Of what does the artist dream when he falls asleep? In *Le Sommeil de la Raison Engendre des Monstres* (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*), Bismuth becomes an interior decorator, offering a wallpaper pattern composed of famous artist names. First created for a wallpaper producer, the strips of paper are cut so that the first and last names are separated. When pasted on the wall, their arrangement

produces humorous chance (or monstrous?) couplings: Andy Ruscha, Ed Buren, Marcel Flavin... The formal problem at the base of the work is how to create variation starting from a simple repeated pattern. The use of artist names, however, makes the work also into a comment on the function of celebrity names, and the extraordinary value they take on in today's speculative art market.

The principal work of the show, from whence the title of the exhibition, *One Man's Mess Is Another Man's Masterpiece*, consists in a projection of shattered glass slide mounts. The intricate and sinuous spider web patterns cast on the wall are evocative of the cracked *Large Glass* of Marcel Duchamp. Here however there is nothing behind the damaged pane — the only 'masterpiece' to be seen is the 'mess' itself. Bismuth's procedure ironically transforms a standard medium for the presentation of images into a new source of images, while also making the particular designs dependent on a (literally) chance collision. The speed and violence of a simple repeated gesture gives rise here to infinite aesthetic variations. If the first part of the show proposes a series of stereotyped images without event (Brad Still Loves You! Wedding Party of the Year, etc.), the second presents a kind of event without images, the projection of a shattering impact purified of any specific content.



• Pierre Bismuth, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, 2007 (detail)

The Baron's Palace

Notes For a Filmscript

By
Sven Augustijnen

BRUSSELS, AUG. 2006 – Chatting with me about her investigations she seems a bit disappointed: They cleaned it up! At least the garden isn't the garbage dump it was before. Yes but God forbid they renovate the building, they will mess it up for sure. She remembers seeing the entrance of the tunnel in her childhood. Which tunnel? The tunnel between the Baron's Palace and the Basilica which he also constructed about 300 meters away. He is buried there. It's very Greek although it's not orthodox at all, the Basilica, she makes clear. The tram connecting Cairo and Heliopolis still seems to dance slowly on its rails. She never rode the tram. Somehow nobody knows who the Baron really was. Was he like you, a Belgian? But he was esteemed as the first urban planner in Egypt. I continue, isn't the building considered a simulacrum? What do you mean? Well, all in all it's a replica of a Hindu temple somewhere much further to the East... Slightly displaced, yet at home. I try to imagine that from his palace and garden full of statues and busts of dragons, Buddhas, Shivas and Krishnas, the Baron could survey his city rising from the

desert. So, as far as the eye could see the Baron would overlook a treeless, arid wasteland? Yes, she responds, and don't forget that it also has Greek and Roman sculptures and that the interiors were totally bourgeois. Can you imagine that the palace is praised for being the first reinforced concrete building in a country full of pyramids? It was prefabricated in France and shipped over, just like the Baron himself was for his funeral. What about the Heliopolis Palace Hotel, the big building? Do you mean the building that is now the Presidency? It's gigantic and much more Islamic in style than the rest of the buildings around it. Looking at the Heliopolis map I wonder if he built the Merryland Park as well? The park has a lake with swans and pelicans. Oh, just like the Royal Zoological garden in Brussels as it was in the 19th century. And is the casino still there? Yes, but there is no gambling anymore, it's illegal for Egyptians to gamble now. So no horse races at the hippodrome either? And the Luna Park? What about the old villas and palm trees? They are crammed between horrible new constructions. Can you imagine Heliopolis – a rectangle infiltrated by chaos and totally exploding around the edges? And did you come across the name of Groppi? It's a

famous ice cream parlour. A very old Heliopolis café that's quite symbolic of the neighbourhood. We used to go there with my grandfather, a typical relic of Egypt's fancy society; super rich, fancy cars, fancy clothes. Never worked a day in his life! We are not sure if he came from a very rich family or if he was just a famous thief. He crashed a plane once and hung the propeller on the wall as a trophy. He may actually have been flying from the Baron's aerodrome. So how was life in Heliopolis in those golden days of Egyptian aristocracy? Super decadent and very much a part of colonialism. But my grandfather was also very active in the anti-British movement. In their old house they used the basement to store weapons used by the resistance. When my father was really young he used to play with his brother in the garden with unloaded Kalashnikovs. How do you picture the Baron? Riding around on a camel or a donkey? In his European costume or dressed up as an Arab? That fits well with the Palace, doesn't it? Looking at one of the photos of the Baron, she remarks: Funny moustache. And, more personally: Don't you want to build a palace? My father spent eight years building a hotel by the sea. Why don't you come? Take the plane, you can still catch the 9pm flight. You wanted to talk about barons, so why don't you come? Sorry, I am stuck in the swamp of Brussels. But what is a baron according to you? Why are you hesitating? I am not sure I understand the question but I am sure I would catch the 9pm flight. What makes a baron a baron? Isn't a baron someone whose family thinks they are important even though they don't really do anything except have money and cool moustaches? That's certainly the case with the Baron's offspring: One was a *bon-vivant* gambling away his father's money; one was looking for sainthood; another made a lot of noise; and last but not least, after having conquered the *crème de la crème* of the French industrialists, the youngest was kidnapped, had his pinkie cut off and was later on indicted for false bankruptcy. But Eduard Louis Joseph Empain, the baron we are talking about, was a true self-made man from a modest family. An engineer who climbed the ladder selling marble blocks for the Palace of Justice in Brussels, the biggest building constructed in the 19th century. By the way, under the Babylonian temple of the Palace of Justice there is a complex network of tunnels leading down



• Cairo, Heliopolis, The Baron's Palace. Photo by Basim Magdy, 2006

the city's hill. Do you think that's how the Baron got his inspiration to build his palace on an artificial elevation and dig a tunnel to his burial place? Or was it more a fetishism of ancient Egyptian architecture and burial rites? For sure, he built railroads all the way from Congo to China, and as far as Russia and Egypt. Take the metro in Paris and think of him. Did you know he was an amateur Egyptologist and was looking for the ancient city of Heliopolis, the city of the Sun God? But he bought the wrong plot of land and only excavated sand. Some say his land was the spot where Napoleon's Egyptian army chopped up the troops of Sultan Selim III in 1800. How did the Baron end up there? He was following in the footsteps of Leopold II who had travelled to the Orient on his honeymoon and had tried to buy out Ferdinand de Lesseps who was then digging the Suez Canal. But the Heir-to-the-Throne didn't manage to pull it off. Later on he declared himself sovereign over the Congo Freestate, where he never set foot. By the way, Edouard Louis Joseph Empain was only named a baron by the King in 1907 after he had constructed his Heliopolis in the desert. The lotus flowers on the Baron's crown are testimony to this. The King and the Baron got along well. They shared the same combination of imagination and enterprising spirit. It's a bad system to consult people in advance, they always say no. It is preferable to simply explain the accomplished fact, as the merciless King would say. They were called the lion and the fox. As it turned out the fox only set foot outside of Europe in 1904, when he disembarked in Alexandria, although he had already created the successful *Société des tramways du Caire* 10 years earlier. Don't you believe me? Sorry but I am still puzzled. Why did he build this Palace? Didn't he want its architecture to conform to the traditions of the country? Yes, but that doesn't explain why he put his teeth into the desert. Already at that time nobody understood what motivated the little hypochondriac man. Some hypothesize that it was simply because some Jews sabotaged his plans to build a new tramline in the city. OK, probably it gave him some drive but this revenge theory will not suffice. Maybe he was enchanted in an overwhelming moment by *Oum el Dounia*, "the mother of civilisation"? Do you have any doubts about that? Having a vision in the desert of sitting in a temple somewhere in Cambodia? The man must have been both a fetishist and exhibitionist. Proving to the world that he could rebuild a city that's supposed to have been the most prestigious of ancient Egypt? With references from the whole world – Arabic buildings, French planning, Indian mythology – what else do you want? Mostly people travel to the middle of nowhere to build their utopias,



• Cairo, Heliopolis, The Baron's Palace. Photo by Basim Magdy, 2006

don't they? Did you say he was a hypochondriac? That fits him well. He's an eccentric and a fetishist, therefore obsessive. Hypochondria is a kind of obsession, isn't it? Yes, he did survive pretty well in Cairo, until he caught Maltese fever, which sent him back home to Brussels in 1909. It took him two years to recover and even so he only managed to return once, just two years before his death in 1927. Sounds tragic. Sure but he was busy serving his country and *le roi chevalier* Albert I as a general of military engineering during the First World War. And although he was a true Catholic, he never found the time to get married. Only at the end of his life did he decide to marry his mistress and to acknowledge his two sons, which was the beginning of an ongoing family feud. His brother, who was his right-hand man in all his businesses, was suddenly appointed to educate the Baron's two sons. But he'd been planning the careers of his own sons for years who would previously have been the legal heirs to the Baron's Empire. So he certainly didn't prevent the Baron's oldest son from going astray, actually he even helped a bit by

(advertisement)

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Exhibition 9/11 – 22/12
Opening 8/11 18-21h

**SVEN
AUGUSTIJNEN
L'HISTOIRE BELGE**

Jan Mot
Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 190
B-1000 Brussel Bruxelles

The Information Man

By
Ed Ruscha

LOS ANGELES, 2 OCT., 1971 – It would be nice if sometime a man would come up to me on the street and say “Hello, I’m the information man and you have not said the word ‘yours’ for 13 minutes – you have not said the word ‘praise’ for 18 days, 3 hours and 9 minutes. You have not used the word ‘petroleum’ in your speech for almost four and a half months, but you wrote the word last Friday evening at 9:35 pm and you used the word ‘hello’ about 30 seconds ago.”

This information man would also have details as to the placement and whereabouts of things. He could tell me possibly of all the books of mine that are out in the public that only 17 are actually placed face up with nothing covering them. 2,026 are in vertical positions in libraries, while 2,715 are under books in stacks. The most weight upon a single book is 68 3/4 pounds and that is in the city of Cologne, Germany in a bookshop. 58 have been lost; 14 totally destroyed by water or fire; while 216 could be considered badly worn. A whopping 319 books are in positions between 40 and 50 degrees and most of these are probably in bookshelves with the stacks leaning at odd angles. 18 of the books have been deliberately thrown away or purposely destroyed. A surprising 53 books have never been opened, most of these being newly purchased and put aside momentarily. Of the approximate 5,000 books of Edward Ruscha that have been purchased, only 32 have actually been used in a directly functional manner: 13 of these have been used as weights for paper or other thing, 7 have been used as

swatters to kill small insects such as flies and mosquitoes and 2 have been used in bodily self-defense. 10 have been used to push open heavy doors (probably, since they are packaged in 10’s one package was used to open the door). 2 were used to nudge wall pictures into correct levels while one was used as a wiper to check the oil on an auto dipstick. 3 are under pillows.

221 people have smelled the books’ pages, probably most of these on the original purchase.

3 of the books have been in continual motion since the purchase over 2 years ago, all of these being on a boat near Seattle, Washington.

Profanity used to discuss the books is as follows; 312 people have used profanity in criticizing them, while 435 people have used profanity in praising them (This last high figure probably due to the fact that profanity is no longer used to necessarily condemn things).

It would be nice to know these things.

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At Art Basel last June, the gallery presented two new works by Mario Garcia Torres, entitled ‘This Painting Is Missing’ and ‘This Painting Has Been Found’. The starting point of these works is the recently published catalogue raisonné of Ed Ruscha and the accompanying list of paintings of which the location is unknown. Garcia Torres had all the paintings remade in the same size. But instead of copying the original image he had painted on them the information usually found on the label: title, year, technique and dimensions. Both works can only be shown together; as soon as a painting is found, it moves from one work to the other.



• Mario Garcia Torres, *This Painting Is Missing* and *This Painting Has Been Found*, 2007 (detail)

In Brief

Deimantas Narkevicius is shortlisted for the Vincent Award 2008. Other shortlisted artists are Francis Alys, Peter Friedl, Liam Gillick and Rebecca Warren. These five artists are invited next spring to an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam during which the winner will be announced.

Pierre Bismuth received a two months residency in Oslo, Norway from the Office for Contemporary Art as part of their International Studio Programme.

The film work *Scena*, by **Deimantas Narkevicius**, was acquired by the MACBA in Barcelona. It is currently on view at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, as part of the collection show of the MACBA.

Three different works by **Manon de Boer** entered the collection of the MUHKA in Antwerp: an early unutilized photo work, and two films: *Resonating Surfaces* (2005) and *Presto. Perfect Sound* (2006).

Agenda

Sven Augustijnen

A Story of the Image: Visual Art as Visual Culture, MuHKA, Antwerp, 1/7/7-18/11; *100% Design Tokyo*, Old Embassy, Tokyo (Japan), 1/11, 19h30-22h; *Open Archive by Auguste Orts*, Benjamin Cook (LUX) and Katerina Gregos (Argos) *On Distribution of Film and Video Work in An Audiovisual and Visual Arts Context*, Argos, Brussels, 1/11, 20h30; *L'Histoire Belge*, Jan Mot, 8/11-23/12; *Maison Grégoire*, Brussels, 10/11-31/01; *Factory #2*, CC Strombeek, Grimbergen (BE), 17/12-23/12

Manon de Boer

52nd International Art Exhibition, Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 10/6-21/11; *Open Archive*, Argos, Brussels, 29/9-8/11; *Territoires de l'Image, Le Fresnoy, Dix Ans de Création*, Musée des Beaux-Arts and La Maison de l'Architecture, Lille, 19/10-31/12; *International and National Projects*, PS1, New York, 21/10-7/1; *Lecture by Anouk De Clercq and Manon de Boer on Their Work*, *Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens*, Deurle (BE), 14/11, 20h; *Les Rencontres Internationales Paris / Berlin / Madrid - #14*, Centre Pompidou, Jeu de Paume and Cinéma l'Entrepôt, Paris, 22/11-1/12; *Resonating Surfaces*, Instituto Cervantes, Brussels, 12/12; *Videoasten*, MuHKA_Media, Antwerp, 19/12, 20h; *The Time That is Left*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, from 31/1 (solo); *The Platforma Video Festival*, Athens, 7/12-12/12

Rineke Dijkstra

Territoires Partagés, Peinture et Photographie Aujourd'hui, Château de Villeneuve, Vence (FR), 30/6-25/11 (cat); *Picturing Modernity*, SF MoMA, San Francisco, from 27/9; 30/40, *A Selection: Forty Artists for Thirty Years of Exhibitions at Marian Goodman Gallery. Part II*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 23/10-24/11; *Getroffen. Otto Dix und die Kunst des Portraits*, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Stuttgart, 1/12-6/4

Mario Garcia Torres

52nd International Art Exhibition, Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 10/6-21/11; *Accords Excentriques, B.P.S.22 Espace de Création Contemporaine*, Charleroi (BE), 8/9-4/11; *Uneasy Angel - Imagine Los Angeles*, Monika Sprüth - Philomene Magers, Munich, 14/9-3/11; *In the Stream of Life*, Bétonsalon, Paris, 17/11-3/2

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster

The World as a Stage, Tate Modern, London, 24/10-6/1

Douglas Gordon

Douglas Gordon Self-Portrait of You + Me, *After the Factory*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 31/10-15/12

Joachim Koester

52nd International Art Exhibition, Slovenian Pavilion, Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 10/6-21/11; *Anakronismer / Against Time*, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, 12/9-25/11; *Numerous Incidents of Indefinite Outcome*, Extra City, Centrum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp, 12/10-16/12 (solo); *Joachim Koester - The Magic Mirror of John Dee and Other Works*, Preus Fotomuseum, Horten (Norway), 21/10-30/12; *Twelve (Former) Real Estate Opportunities*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 8/11-22/12 (solo)

David Lamelas

A Theatre Without Theatre, Museu Berardi, Lisboa, 01/11-20/01; *Playground / Living Currency*, Kunstencentrum Stuk, Leuven (BE), 8-10/11, 20h

Deimantas Narkevicius

Future in the Past, *The 52nd International Art Exhibition*, Slovenian Pavilion, Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 10/6-21/11; *Deimantas Narkevicius. History Continued...*, Műcsarnok Kunsthalle, Budapest, 11/09-11/11 (solo); *MACBA at Frankfurter Kunstverein, A Selection of Works from the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 9/10-13/1

Tino Sehgal

Tino Sehgal, Lower Gallery, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, from 5/9; *Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst 2007*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 14/9-4/11; *Tino Sehgal*, Le Magasin, Grenoble, 7/10-18/11; *The World as a Stage*, Tate Modern, London, 24/10-6/1; *Tino Sehgal*, Marian Goodman, NY, 30/11-5/1 (solo); *Tino Sehgal*, Medtronic Gallery, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 7/12-23/3 (solo)

Ian Wilson

A Theatre Without Theatre, Museu Berardi, Lisboa, 01/11-20/01; *In the Stream of Life*, Bétonsalon, Paris, 17/11-3/2; *A Spoken Word Exhibition*, Swiss Institute, New York, 2/11-7/11

Other artists of the gallery:
Pierre Bismuth, Sharon Lockhart

Publications

Mario Garcia Torres

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La maison de l'architecture, Lille, 17/10

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JAN MOT

Rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 190
B-1000 Brussel Bruxelles
tel: +32 2 514 10 10
fax: +32 2 514 14 46
office@janmot.com
www.janmot.com

Thursday-Friday-Saturday 2 p.m.-6.30 p.m.
jeudi-vendredi-samedi 14-18.30h
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