

ARTFORUM, *Gabriel Lester DE APPEL ARTS CENTRE*, p.288-289, Huib Haye van der Werf, October 2016. Vol. 54 Issue 8.

ARTFORUM

It is my impression that Elrod's underlying concept has little to do with the celebration of a new technological tool, but a great deal to do with the idea of finding an immediate emotional result, achieved through a process that is anything but direct or expressionistic. Over the course of the twentieth century there have been many examples of this type of approach to the use of technological tools. These have ranged from Man Ray's airbrushed "aerographs," to the "light paintings" on emulsified canvas made by a number of artists in the 1970s and '80s, to what the curator and critic Vittorio Fagone has dubbed the "electronic brush" of certain video artists—not to mention the digital landscape paintings David Hockney makes using his iPad.

Elrod is not exploring the medium as a modernist might have done, but rather is simulating painting as it persists in our imagination, with its attendant baggage of gesture, composition, narration, and even genius. On the one hand, there is what we might call a pedagogical intention to reaffirm the idea that painting, and more generally art, is a mental process, and by nature a prolonged one even when the work is composed in one go. But if Elrod were to limit himself to this method, he would become a pedagogue who works through images, a critic who employs maieutics rather than words. Instead, he is an artist; before he addresses the public, in works such as *The Invisible Thread* or *At the Drive-In*, with their blurs and looping scribbles, he addresses the meaning of painting and its making, the search for that eternal alchemy of a sign that is not a sign, a color that is not color, a work that consists solely of itself, through its own inner necessity, for which the artist acts as an organizing demiurge rather than a creator. Thus every new tool available to the artist corresponds to a series of investigations, all with the same goal—to seek, and perhaps find, the limitations of painting.

The computer seems to expand the range of painting's possibilities infinitely. Yet even as millions of internet users construct images every day, there are not many artists who openly avail themselves of these means. Why? In material terms, the response might be that in a socio-cultural context like the present, the aura of the artist has become dispensable. In artistic terms, the response is that, despite the medium's potential, its formal language remains, paradoxically, meager and underdeveloped. Elrod is among the few artists working to remedy this.

—Marco Meneguzzo

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

BRESCIA, ITALY

Sabrina Mezzaqui and Paolo Novelli GALLERIA MASSIMO MININI

There is no clear purpose in hand-drawing ornamental motifs, yet in her *I quaderni di Adriano* (Hadrian's Notebooks), 2016, Sabrina Mezzaqui has exhaustively reproduced the decorative scheme of a mosaic floor. Turning the pages of the twenty graph-paper notebooks that comprise the work, arranged in rows of four by five, viewers encountered varying motifs from mosaics in the Roman emperor Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, an elegant repertory of arabesque, geometric, and floral elements. Ornamentation—an organizational expression of a human predilection for beautiful form—conveys configurations that can be infinitely reiterated. Although seemingly gratuitous, the slow gesture of consciously repeating these decorative schemes in pencil is actually profoundly meaningful, as it articulates the emotional and mental tensions embodied in the ornamental patterns themselves.

But what of the man who first lived amid these decorations? The artist conjures the voice of Hadrian, for whom the villa was built in the second century CE, through the writing of Marguerite Yourcenar. In *La Villa*, 2016, Mezzaqui presents a fragment of Yourcenar's well-

known first-person novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951) in the form of a subtle grid that aims to illustrate the emperor's words, evoking both a visit to his beloved dwelling and the passage of time. We no longer know if it is Hadrian, Yourcenar, or Mezzaqui who is speaking; if the idea for the exhibition originated with the artist's visit to the Villa, it evolved into a journey through superimposed memories. Indeed, perusing the notebooks exhibited in the gallery, visitors could come across poetic notations by both ancient Roman and contemporary writers. This wide range was expanded further in other works, as Mezzaqui pays homage to the kaleidoscopic ideas of Simone Weil in eighteen notebooks protected by soft wool covers, which contain handwritten passages from the French philosopher and mystic's work (*I quaderni di Simone Weil* [Simone Weil's Notebooks], 2010–16), and in three white cellulose panels containing words (*Disciplina dell'attenzione* [Discipline of Attention], *Docilità* [Docility], and *Seconda potenza* [Second Strength], all 2016).



Sabrina Mezzaqui,
I quaderni di Adriano
(Hadrian's Notebooks),
2016, twenty note-
books, wood and glass
table; notebooks,
each 8 x 9 1/2"; table,
29 1/2 x 44 x 44 1/2".

Within these formats, Mezzaqui's work revealed itself slowly, as if the viewer were opening a series of doors, a layered quality emphasized through its contrast with the apparent directness and simplicity of Paolo Novelli's sixteen black-and-white photographs, on display in his contemporaneous solo show at the gallery. *La notte non basta* (The Night Is Not Enough), 2011–12, consists of a series of nocturnal images of the closed windows of people's homes, some illuminated by a street lamp, all similarly framed. The individual numbered images, all titled *Study*, show just one or two details of a locked window. Through the idea of the window as threshold, Novelli also hints at the memories, presences, and absences that are invisible from outside yet make up the concealed life within. Just as we can imagine turning a page of one of Mezzaqui's notebooks to reveal a startlingly different motif, much as we might experience a chance occurrence or mutating memory in daily life, we can likewise picture someone opening one of the windows shown in Novelli's work and interrupting the silence, allowing us to traverse the threshold.

—Alessandra Piselli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

AMSTERDAM

Gabriel Lester DE APPEL ARTS CENTRE

To classify Gabriel Lester's "Unresolved Extravaganza" (also known as "Unhappen," "Apple Z," "Præmonitions," "The Nine Day Week," and "Seven Hills Secrets") as a solo show would not be correct, but it is exactly this fallacy that reveals his distinctive métier. For this overview of Lester's collaborative works of the past twenty years, the artist



Gabriel Lester,
Robertas Narkus, Lisa
Rosenblatt, and Freck
Wambacq, *Bermuda*,
2016, mixed media.
Installation view.

steadfastly continues to do what he's always done—namely, work with others. The exhibition was curated and produced by the artist himself—Lester had been invited to do the show by de Appel's director, Lorenzo Benedetti, but when Benedetti was controversially dismissed last year, Lester decided to proceed on his own—and includes the contributions of more than twenty artists, musicians, programmers, architects, writers, and friends. *Distanza e mezzogna* (Distance and Perspective), 2007, with Mariana Castillo Deball, and *Amorales vs. Amorales*, 1996, with Carlos Amorales, are apt examples of this collaborative spirit. The first is a set of four porcelain door knockers hanging on the wall while resting against rounded mirrors, a lesson in material and functional suspense. The latter is a video showing Lester and writer/filmmaker Diego Gutierrez wearing masks that cast both of them as Amorales. In taking on this identity at the request of Amorales, Lester crossed over from commercial film work to artistic practice, and the interchanging of diverse identities is a theme to which he regularly returns.

Lester's collective impulse is displayed most patently in the new installation *The French Horn*, 2016. It's a kind of summa of the exhibition: a small back room filled with a collage of images and different marks composed by others and Lester himself. It reads like a map of invisible associations and hidden implications. Like the instrument named in the work's title, the space feels like an intricate construct capable of the most beautiful notes as well as the most discordant sounds. Its location just behind the wall that hosts the video *Murmur*, 2015, reveals another strength of Lester's practice: his aptitude for scenography. In this work, classical musicians play a piece of music through complicated openings in a white wall much like the one the video is projected on, evoking a claustrophobic and contentious backstage social world.

The exhibition only gradually discloses its many layers and implications, giving the visitor a certain self-consciousness about his or her own movements and actions. Where the stage begins or ends is never really clear. This ambiguity finds its culmination in another new work, *Bermuda*, 2016, an all-encompassing installation consisting of a cabinet of compartments filling an entire wall of a large, darkened space. A disembodied voice tells a stirring and at times disorienting tale of disappearance, transformation, and encounter among a group of castaways on a small island. Inside each partition is an object that is lit up as if by magic to illustrate details of the story.

Lester's hand seems to have touched every aspect of this exhibition, seen or unseen, but less in the manner of an artist or even a curator than of a movie director. This "Unresolved Extravaganza" is a total production that could only have been realized by a team of collaborators under a strong leader. It demonstrates the scope of Lester's ambitions, but also his cunning and finesse in constructing an alternative world riddled with equivocal clues and uncertain identities.

—Huib Haye van der Werf

BEIJING

"An Exhibition About Exhibitions"

OCAT INSTITUTE

With "An Exhibition about Exhibitions: Displaying Contemporary Art in the 1990s," curator Wu Hung—OCAT Institute's executive director—revisits twelve experimental exhibitions organized in China during the '90s. This marks the first time these formerly underground and marginalized shows have been brought into an official art institution, and is the latest link in a chain of research projects, exhibitions, and publications initiated by Wu and the institute to address the art history of a decade when artists longed to inspire social interaction through public exhibitions, but also hoped to retain their experimental edge. The result is distinctly original. The first part of the show consists of documentary materials, while the second, titled "Canceled: An Exhibition about an Exhibition," addresses the circumstances surrounding the 1998 show "It's Me," curated by Leng Lin and intended for the Imperial Ancestral Temple next to the Forbidden City, but called off at the last minute.

"Canceled" is not a faithful replication of "It's Me," but instead is an installation examining the interactions between artists, audience, and artworks. When "It's Me" was canceled, documentary film director Wu Wenguang commented, "All the people are outside, all the works are inside." Wu Hung's curatorial premise begins with precisely this thwarted spatial relationship. A large screen divides the exhibition hall into two spaces. The interior portion of the room beyond the screen simulates the inner courtyard of the Ancestral Temple's main hall, with the wall and three pillars painted in the crimson of ancient architecture. Song Dong's work *Father and Son in the Former Ancestral Temple*, 1998, is projected on the pillars, but the rest of the space is completely empty. On the central screen, Wu Wenguang's *Diary: Snou, Nov. 21, 1998, 1999*, is screened in an endless loop. The director recorded the events on the day of the exhibition's cancellation from a subjective viewpoint, and most of the footage focuses on the artists in the square outside the Ancestral Temple. Watching the documentary while standing on the external side of the screen provides a sense of standing where the artists stood that day, and the screen itself is a proxy for the temple's closed door, delineating interior and exterior architectural spaces and keeping the artists' work separate from the public. Wu Hung uses layering to create a minimalist but rich unified space. This curatorial concept is not unrelated to his many years of research on ancient Chinese burial spaces.

By contrast, the archival part of the exhibition is laid out in a more rational, objective way. An abundance of photographs, drawings, invitations, and publications—including video footage of "Post Sense Sensibility" (1999) and "Supermarket" (1999) by artist Kan Xuan—



Song Dong, *Father and Son in the Former Ancestral Temple*, 1998, three-channel video, color, sound; 6 minutes, 11 minutes, 4 minutes 50 seconds. Installation view. From "An Exhibition About Exhibitions." Photo: Zhang Ying.

OCTOBER 2016 289