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# art agenda

Basel Roundup  
by Chris Sharp



Veronika Pausova, *self-portrait, from behind*, 2018.

This Art Basel Roundup comes fresh on the heels of a visit to the opening of the 10th Berlin Biennale. This is significant because, whatever you might say about the current edition, it was conspicuously and refreshingly non-white and non-Western-European centric. As a white-dude viewer, I felt, perhaps for the first time in my life, like something of a minority—a novel, not disagreeable, if educational feeling. This registered as a slightly-more-alienated-than-usual sense of spectatorship and increased awareness of my own self and social conditions. Upon unglamorously

quitting, via a delayed and overbooked EasyJet flight, the largely pseudo-anarchic, bobo utopia (boboptopia?) of Berlin for the essentially patrician, landlocked, immaculately manicured wilds of Basel, this feeling did not merely increase, but was severely aggravated.

Superficially a member of the racial majority that seems effortlessly to frequent Basel, I am actually an impostor, an impecunious charlatan whose sense of exclusion begins at the instant of so much as wanting to buy an espresso, which goes for five francs. Incidentally, I don't know what all the fuss around "illegal" immigration in Western Europe and such hyper-rich countries like Switzerland is all about? If petit-bourgeois, curatorial riffraff such as myself can't receive the bill without visibly cringing, how can a family of refugees even begin to think about walking down the street there? Don't the Swiss know that they have already precluded any undue lingering (of curatorial riffraff) by rendering their country, to say the least, prohibitively expensive (as much could be said about the bulk of Western Europe)? Or are they so blinded by privilege that this alleged prohibition doesn't even occur to them? It's hard to say. But when I passed Theaster Gates on the street one day, the look on his face seemed to mirror my inner shock and up the ante with a barely suppressed rictus of bemused disgust. He was, after all, one of maybe a dozen black people I saw throughout my economically bracing five-day sojourn there.

After that lengthy introduction about being dazed by privilege (my own and others), I should say that I don't mind art fairs. I even unfashionably like them. Sure, they are far from an ideal setting in which to experience contemporary art, but where else can you see, in a matter of hours, more art than anyone should see in a lifetime? In addition to luxury goods being exchanged for middling to vast sums of money, discoveries are made by many, discussions are had, and real exposure is liable to lead to real exhibitions, all over the world. And where general quality is concerned, both Art Basel and Liste are pretty tough to beat. As is customary in such contexts, there was no shortage of great painting in both fairs. Some Liste standouts include Satoshi Kojima (plus great early works on paper by Lynn Hershman Leeson) at New York's Bridget Donahue, Autumn Ramsey at Galerie Crèvecoeur (Paris), Vaginal Davis at London's Dan Gunn, Veronika Pausova at New York's Simone Subal, and Celia Hempton's deftly executed, small landscape paintings from online-accessible surveillance cameras at Southard Reid, London. Urara Tsuchiya's orgies featuring animals in ceramic bowls at London's Union Pacific were a big hit with the kids.

The main fair teemed with goodies from great work by Alastair Mackinven at Reena Spaulings, New York, Patricia Treib at Bureau, also in New York, to Elizabeth McIntosh at Berlin's Tanya Leighton to more precious gems, such as *65-A-30x30*, a small 1965 Martin Barré at Matthew Marks, New York, consisting of a single spray-painted gesture across half the canvas. Nominally departing from the theme of painting altogether, and also one of the standouts of the fair, was Düsseldorf's Max Mayer's solo presentation of the late great Jef Geys in the Feature section. Sparsely comprised of three of the six doors which were originally presented in Jan Hoet's historic 1986 exhibition "Chambres d'Amis" in Ghent, in which the artworks were exhibited in people's homes, these functionless doors, painted with the words "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" in Belgium's three official languages (Flemish, French, and German) were originally placed in working-class homes around the city. Rarely sung relics of institutional critique, they spoke, among many things, of the contextual discrepancy between Geys's choice of placement and the wealth of the rest of the dwellings in which the rest of Hoet's show was presented.

Institutionally speaking, Basel rarely disappoints, and this year was no exception. At the Kunstmuseum, Theaster Gates's "Black Madonna" was a rich, multipart affair replete with a printing shop, a black Madonna shrine, and a disturbing blackface Shirley Temple video interspersed with black cuts and slow-motion images of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson tap dancing, among other things. Upstairs was Sam Gilliam's "The Music of Color," featuring a selection of lyrical, stretched and draped, process-based abstractions made between 1967 and 1973—a mode of painting I have seen imitated with enough frequency to make it a type. The contrast between Raphaela Vogel and Luke Willis Thompson's shows at Kunsthalle Basel could not have been more marked. All but deliberately unendurable, Vogel's soundtrack-laden, complex exhibition "Ultranackt" had me crouch, peek into, and watch a video in a public pissoire without being entirely sure why, while Thompson's film installation *\_Human* (2018) left me with doubts. Silently projected by a visible 35mm projector on a massive screen is a film of a small, architectural construction (*In the House of My Father*, 1996–97) made by and from the skin of the Jamaican-British artist Donald Rodney, who died in 1998 at the age of 36 due to complications related to sickle cell anemia. Initially intriguing, and even beautiful, the short film reads—with its mysterious, cinematic contemplation of another artist's work—like an outsized Tacita Dean. But something about its will to expertly check off so many loaded boxes of contemporary interest, which includes questions of skin color and identity, and therefore snugly inserts itself into the zeitgeist, leaves me a little suspicious.

That said, one exhibition that checked off all the boxes, and more, it turns out, without even trying, was the Bruce Nauman retrospective at Schaulager. Allow me to state that this show alone made all the overpriced espressos, meager sausages, and staggering surfeit of bread totally worth the trip. Entitled "Disappearing Acts," and curated by Kathy Halbreich, the retrospective cannily focused on disappearance throughout Nauman's practice. While that is all well and good, what really got me here was a reference that had never before occurred to me: Franz Kafka. Indeed, the much-celebrated mark of Samuel Beckett notwithstanding, Nauman, I would argue after seeing this show, is to contemporary art what Kafka was to twentieth-century literature. For seeing a great deal of this work together—much of which I had already seen—allowed me to properly perceive and fully appreciate the darkly comic authoritarian/anti-authoritarian component of Nauman's output for the first time. Never mind that a great deal of the work, such as the masterful *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985), a two-channel video in which two talking heads, a black man and a white woman, state things with an initial calm which gradually yields to escalating aggression—"I was a good girl, you were a good girl, we were good"—that could double as effective torture devices in Guantanamo Bay *and* English-language instructional videos (how to conjugate verbs, for instance). The same could be said of the sound installation *Get Out of my Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968) or *Walk with Contrapposto* (1968), a video in which a young Nauman walks down a dark narrow corridor in a kind of contrapposto, as if this were a prison exercise/torture, or even a drunk-driving test ("Now walk contrapposto in a straight line!"), the new large-scale version of which comes off as a kind of criminal line up. And I'm sorry: if the tantruming clown in *Clown Torture* (1987) is not Donald Fucking Trump, then I am the Pied Fucking Piper.

Questions and methods of authority can be seen throughout the entire show from the elasticity and collapse of meaning in language—particularly relevant in a post-factual age—to the authoritarian confines of the human body, which Nauman does not take for granted. Transmitted behaviors and instruction (as a form of torture?) are similarly addressed. Consider the sound piece *For*

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*Beginners (Instructed Piano)* (2010) at the entrance to the exhibition, which consists of a piano being poorly, tentatively, even tortuously played (three cheers for bad students) or the video installation of *Shadow Puppets and Instructed Mime* (1990) at its very end. This work is comprised of pairs of inverted swinging bald heads silhouetted behind illuminated textiles and a video of a bewildered female mime carrying out instructions from an authoritarian male voice—sit down, play dead, etc. Of course, it is as impossible to reduce Nauman to metaphor or allegory as it would be with Kafka, but it is hard to shake the sense of how much of this seems to foretell our current, beleaguered epoch (which is maybe not so current after all). Whatever the case may be, while so many artists are making work which seeks to embody our dark, increasingly totalitarian age, Nauman did it without even trying, just like, it so happens, Kafka some hundred years before him.