



Splash!, 2006

Volumes of Volumes

The last ten years have witnessed the emergence of a number of artistic practices apparently characterised by their use of the exhibition situation as a way of multiplying social activities such as getting together, chatting, relaxing, eating, having a drink, playing table football, etc. And so, in the space of a few years, these activities have been promoted to the rank of legitimate artistic activities within the category of “relational aesthetics.” Paradoxically, though, the role of the beholder/actor in this relational aesthetics has remained very superficial and ephemeral, like a fiction of reality. Should we therefore conclude that these interventions were in fact simple stage sets in which certain kinds of behaviour were meant not only to manifest themselves but also to be theatricalised? More than ever, humankind, imprisoned, as Pascal put it, in its “weak and mortal condition,” seeks to be dazzled by “divertissement and outside occupations.” The confusion of reality and false appearances grows worse and worse. Personal fulfilment becomes more a matter of getting a bigger fix of more of the same than a truly introspective, reflective exploration of our own individuality.

In this general artistic context, the work of Peter Wüthrich stands out very clearly. Far from any effect of fashion, he has in the last fifteen years managed to develop a personal body of work of great formal and also conceptual coherence. The book – its economy, symbolism and poetical impact – constitutes the central element of this extremely rigorous and oh so facetious artistic adventure.

Over the years, the references drawn from multiple artistic experiences become points of energy, testaments of truth. Wüthrich has always claimed an independent, deliberately solitary and sometimes marginal artistic position, always at a distance, never invoking any schools or exclusive set of ideas.

Today, this singularity is on view in the magnificent setting of the Fondation pour l’Art Contemporain Claudine et Jean-Marc Salomon at Alex. With *My World*, Peter Wüthrich invites us on a very singular exploration of the Château d’Arenthon in which he has taken up residence. From the crypt to the chapel and from there to the tower, the castle takes on a new life that is now enchanted, now disenchanting, depending on the mood of its new occupant.

In modern literature, the château or castle is a cracked thing. It is a castle of writing, always caught up in discourses, representations and narratives (*Literarisches Modell*, 2001), and at the same time a political castle, a catalyst of national struggles and class conflict. Through Hugo and Balzac, Céline and Gracq, it is explored as an impure edifice, a place where crisis is juxtaposed with restoration, modernity with reaction, and collapse with self-affirmation. Kafka’s *The Castle*, Julien Gracq’s *Château d’Argol*, Gombrowicz’s *Possessed*, *The Tartar Steppe* by Dino Buzzati, Céline’s *Castle to Castle* – these are some of the important twentieth-century texts in which the castle, or a fortified edifice, plays a central, determining role in the development of the fiction.

For Peter Wüthrich the castle is a literary structure which enables him to elaborate an artistic project that is materialised at the entrance to the grounds by *My Friends*, discreetly perched along the tree-lined drive. One cannot fail to be struck by the quantity of pieces by this artist who is metamorphosing this castle at Alex and drawing fresh narrative power from its architecture. But while the castle is conducive to recount-

ing, the telling is not always aimed at fact. Every building is matter for interpretation and, as such, elicits the strategies of fiction.

Each room in this castle takes us into the heart of a world of books that Wüthrich recuperates and conserves, not like a bibliophile building his ideal library, but like an entrepreneur stocking material for a future project. Thousands of books, piles up, assembled, juxtaposed, manipulated and organized into singular chromatic compositions, sometimes dismantled, taken apart, dissected, but always so that the components of each work are given value. From these combinations and permutations come deliberately hybrid installations full of formal diversity that prompt us to ponder the nature of our everyday space.

The adventure of which Wüthrich is apparently the hero, a rich tale that moves between dream, humour and gravitas, brings together here several thousand protagonists with highly diverse origins and natures, but all of them books, those familiar objects that have been our companions ever since earliest childhood.

Books have accompanied the history of humankind. But do we really know them? Like the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, of which we see only the smile, we grasp only their appearance. The book is a fabulous dream machine. Reading is always an act of appropriating, inventing and producing meanings. To borrow Michel de Certeau's fine metaphor, "the reader is a poacher on another man's land." The whole history of reading rests on this freedom the reader has, which is close to the artist's, who displaces and subverts what the book tries to impose on him.

The book as object has constituted the key material of Peter Wüthrich's artistic project ever since 1992. He prefers the form to the content, and uses it as constantly changing material and architectural element. It is true that the world of the book is by nature an inexhaustible inventory of forms and styles, by virtue of its intrinsic components: typography, grammage, ink colours, illustrations and adornments, bindings, covers and bookmarks.

"Man of letters": these are the words that Le Corbusier had written on his identity papers in the 1930s. There were plenty of other titles he could have chosen from among his multiple activities as architect, urban designer, theoretician, photographer, draftsman, painter and sculptor. He could, more generically, have called himself an "artist." Le Corbusier had a very singular relation to books. Certainly, he was a great reader and writer, but he was above all a tireless "literary artisan," overseeing the editorial process from writing all the way to production, as if the intellectual preparation of a book was inseparable from its technical production. This determination to control the editorial process from beginning to end is manifest throughout Le Corbusier's creative work. Indeed, he even suggested an analogy between the art of building and the art of typography. Readers know that a book is primarily a space, a place one enters with one set of ideas and leaves with another. While the Internet and digitisation have introduced new ways of reading, here this space becomes present as a material object.

Wüthrich's use of the book as building material harks back to a long tradition. Whether in its textual component, its internal organisation or its physical characteristics, the book is inhabited by the image of architecture, and was long before the invention of printing. Wüthrich considers the book not only in terms of just the verbal approach, but according to that of a second virtue with which Paul Valéry credited the book: "its quality as an object, its physique" (Paul Valéry: *Les deux vertus d'un livre*, 1926, *Œuvres*, Paris: Gallimard "La Pléiade," 1977, vol. 2, p. 1246–1250).

Wüthrich effectively conceives his installations as projects that are both conceptual and material, whose elaboration he likes to control in full. His artistic development, his attachment to his exhibition projects and publications, all bear witness to his constant questioning of the object, of the "book tool," undertaken with great ingenuity and formal and aesthetic adroitness. He thus sets up a constant back and forth in his work between the space of the book and the field of the visual arts, with the book as iconographic motif. One recalls those words from Mallarmé that Le Corbusier integrated into the Swiss Pavilion in the Cité Universitaire, Paris, in 1948: "Keep my wing in your hand." They inspired him to draw the winged figure that would appear on the cover of his own book, *Poésie sur Alger*, in 1951. Wings clearly symbolise flight, lightness, immateriality, elevation towards the sublime, and also express a belonging to the celestial sphere, a breaking free of earthly bonds. In *Phaedrus*, Plato writes that wings have the strength to "lift the body above the earth and carry it to the place where gods dwell" (cf. Wüthrich's installation at the Ludwig Museum, Suermondt, in 1996). (see p. 82)

Here we may think more particularly of the *Imago* series of photographs that Wüthrich has been working on since 1993, and also of the *Angels of Santiago de Compostela*, in which the book becomes something organic, an independent personality. The titles of the works and the borrowings and references from world literature also sound like homages: to Nabokov, for example, in *Humbert Humbert*, or to Kafka, in the new installation titled *Literary Fragment*.

The physical and visual impact of the book is also one of Wüthrich's main concerns. He moves fluently from the position of architect to that of the painter dealing with the pictorial questions of juxtaposed colours (*Literarisches Aquarell*, 1995, *Literarisches Portrait*, 2000, *Adjektive*, 1993, *Tiegel*, 1996–98) and of geometrical compositions using the formats, typographies and physical qualities of these books.

Here we might mention Le Corbusier's 1918 painting *The Mantelpiece (La Cheminée)*, which, according to his own self-created mythology, marked the beginning of his artistic oeuvre. In this painting, two books, one placed on the other, lie beside a cube. They are "volumes" in both senses of the word.

This same dynamic is at work in the installation titled *Literary Food*, which confronts the visitor with a half-open wardrobe containing several shelves holding cans whose new identity is defined by book jackets. This new installation questions the role of a book voided of its contents. In Pirandello's *Mondo di carta* (World of Paper), the character Professore Balicci reads so much that he becomes blind and his only comfort, his only certainty, is when he leafs through the books he can no longer read and the text comes back into his memory and, along with it, the universe as it is and should be.

But does the world of the book exist when there is no one to take possession of it, to use it, to inscribe it in memory or transform it into experience? And is it not here that we find the very essence of Peter Wüthrich's art?

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