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**EXPERTS: DOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS HAVE NO BASIS
IN FACT OR HISTORY**

Curated by Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, 15 May 2012–13 January 2013

Reviewed by Charlene K. Lau, York University

Bernhard Willhelm is an *enfant terrible* of the fashion world in all senses of the term; never one to adhere strictly to tradition, he prefers to breach what it means to be a fashion designer and conventional boundaries of good taste. Through a multidisciplinary practice that includes performance, long-standing collaborations with artists, and more traditional runway presentations, Willhelm and his business partner Jutta Kraus have redefined contemporary avant-gardism through the lens of fashion. With this knowledge in mind, the Middelheim Museum invited Willhelm and Kraus to reimagine the display of the 50-year-old permanent collection, not only by bringing key sculptures out of storage, but also by disrupting modes of seeing.

Primarily known as an outdoor sculpture park, the Middelheim houses temporary exhibitions like *Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History* in the modernist Braem Pavilion. German artist Carsten Fock's trademark block lettering of the exhibition title on the window of the pavilion initially greets the viewer and immediately one knows that something is amiss. Once inside, visitors are directed to a room where Fock's text instructs them to 'Please protect your shoes'. I opt to remove my shoes, and proceed to pad around the carpeted exhibition space, as if it were my living room. An oversized yellow felt arrow on the floor indicates a meandering path through the installation, and terminates at a tree-like plywood structure that holds publications on sculpture in general, as well as on artists whose works are held in the Middelheim collection. Although the venue feels like a generously-sized living room, the exhibition resembles more a playroom or carnival fun house than anything, examining not only ideas of the body as subject matter for sculpture, but also how bodies behave in the exhibition space. Here, the physical hybridizes with the metaphysical. As the pavilion is hidden in the forest of the Middelheim,



Bernhard Willhelm and Jutta Kraus, Experts: Doomsday Predictions Have No Basis in Fact or History (2012–13), installation views. Photos: © Joris Casaer, courtesy Middelheim Museum, Antwerp.

the exhibition space easily transforms into a place of contemplation and thought. The result is an environment that satiates both the mental and physical states of the body.

The exhibition is a glimpse into the Willhelm's fantastical utopia and its subversive playfulness. Sculptures by Jean Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Käthe Kollwitz and Auguste Rodin have been perched by the curators alongside (relatively) more contemporary works by Paul Van Hoeydonck, Peter Rogiers and Kurt Trampedach. Some are stuffed into unfinished plywood 'crates', while others rest casually atop the wooden structures. The works are simultaneously made precious in their sheltered placement, yet have the same preciousness stripped by means of the rough-hewn containers. Bare fluorescent tube lighting illuminates some of the works, but lends a vibrant glow, almost achieving a futurity rather than reminding one of unfortunate grade-school classrooms or characterless office cubicles. Mirrors reflect the inaccessible backs of some of the sculptures, allowing the viewer to see all-around, including one's own body in the juxtaposition. Experiencing the works in this way is what Middelheim curator Sara Weyns likens to discovering treasures in jewel boxes. As some works are shown above eye-level, the viewer looks up and around. It is a hyperactive experience where one is forced to move more freely in the space, sit on wonky-looking chairs, or climb on ladders to get a better look. Thus, the change in perspective is twofold: viewers are led not only to think outside of conventional modes of display in the white cube environment, they are also asked to change their physical behaviour in moving about the space.

Despite containing many of the exhibition's works in boxes, Willhelm and Kraus seek to resist metaphorical boxes in their own practice. To borrow from Theodor Adorno's work on Wagner and *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is their 'intention to obliterate the frontiers separating the individual arts' (Adorno 1985: 97). As Weyns (2012) says, 'chaos and richness is what they wanted, not structure' and that the exhibition seemed still 'too classical' for them. Several times during the installation process, Willhelm dismissed arrangements as 'too *Elle Décoration*' in reference to the interior decorating magazine and its penchant for tasteful home interiors (Weyns 2012). *Experts* lives up to its curators' wild imaginations. The Middelheim has received negative feedback about Willhelm and Kraus's curation, including one e-mail that objected to how Giacometti's *Venice II* (1956) was shown (presumably because it was confined to a crate and lit by a fluorescent tube). For what is the avant-garde if it does not test limits, pose critical questions, and subvert disciplinary norms? Willhelm and Kraus reinvigorate the avant-garde project with their fantastical visual practice, whether it is with exhibitions like *Experts* or their outrageous fashions.

Although rare, the fashion designer-curator hybrid has a few precedents. This pairing specifically calls to mind the Hedi Slimane-curated exhibition, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (2007), at Arndt & Partner Berlin. Slimane – who at the time was creative director of Dior Homme, and is now at the helm of Saint Laurent Paris – promotes a cult of personality. This was translated directly into *Sweet Bird of Youth* in that it was a colourless (read: black and white) exhibition that adhered strictly to Slimane's

austere personal aesthetic. Willhelm is no different with his ‘totalizing vision’ for *Experts* (Roberts 2011: 146, emphasis in original). By ensuring the visual cogency of everything from the furniture design, the display of objects to the signage, Willhelm transforms brand identity into a museum-quality exhibition. Yet, this is not the crass commercialization of Takashi Murakami’s Louis Vuitton boutique-in-an-exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (2008). Instead, Willhelm and Kraus seamlessly incorporate their creative practice with commerce in more subtle ways; they fully embrace their function as fashion designers, but neither deny nor comply with the aims of the market. It is this quality that makes their work so undefinable and slippery. In the case of *Experts*, visitors are asked to confront such elusiveness, to question ways of seeing and make critical judgments. Along the way, they discover alternative perspectives, and more importantly, see the world in the way Willhelm does.

References

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COME CLOSER: ART AROUND THE BOWERY, 1969–1989

Curated by Ethan Swan, New Museum, New York, 19 September–30 December 2012

Reviewed by Andrew Wasserman, Stony Brook University

In the final chapter of his 1961 pop-sociological study of ‘the Bowery Man’, Elmer Bendiner projected possible environmental reforms of the Bowery as Skid Row. Alerting his reader to the social and material conditions of this Manhattan den of iniquities, Bendiner described the Bowery as both the site at which and the lens through which American culture is unflatteringly revealed. In answer to the question of what is to be done with this ‘drunken street’ – this ‘insolent, mocking street’ – Bendiner resignedly conceded, ‘It must be destroyed, of course, and replaced with a sober, business-like, no-nonsense avenue’ by those ready to ‘cut thorough the street’ and ‘rebuild the avenue in brick and stone and steel’ (Bendiner 1961: 182–83).