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Malin Ståhl

Happy Mechanics: Part 1

What are the mechanics that transmit joy? The unexpected is one possible response, however this is not an exhibition that tends to answers but rather seeks to open up further questions. *Happy Mechanics* brings together a wide variety of works where you find an unexpected use and combination of materials, such as everyday objects pulled out of context to form assemblages with new meanings. There are references to language and codes, a play with syntax, a rearranging of familiar components, an estrangement from the already known.

In Stuart Sherman's non-narrative video performance *Selections from the Eleventh Spectacle (The Erotic)* (1979), we observe a deadpan interaction with simple store-bought objects. Sherman manipulates these objects in ways that demonstrate their use or unexpressed relations to one another. Watching Sherman's performances is like listening to a language that you don't quite grasp. There is a logic to the performer's gestures, a coherent grammar, but Sherman takes us beyond this order to intentionally lose touch with logic, leaving us hovering on the border of comprehension.

In an attempt at surprising herself, Hayley Tompkins strives to make something that she herself doesn't recognise. In *Sleeve* (2016) and *The Shirt Says I Feel 1* (2021) Tompkins has painted on pieces of clothing, an act that allows her work to move away from the pictorial plane and into the physical domain, to be part of the material world, and as such occupying an unstable position – both painting and object. The energetic yet dream-like abstract painting suggests an inner state unconcerned with, and unconquered by, the rationalisation of language.

Nancy Lupo also busies herself with the 'real'. Lupo's installations generally include ordinary objects such as furniture, dog bowls and plastic Rubbermaid® trash cans, to name a few. With an interest in perception, Lupo locates art in the space that a form holds. In *Train* (2015), a seven-metre-long procession of red Rubbermaid® bins, containers have been decorated with chocolate, cherries, cheese, quail eggs and scented toilet paper. The procession of redolent bins is not to be understood as sculpture, but rather as an activator, bringing into perception and consciousness something so common that it has become inconspicuous. The choice of decorative material does not just recreate the sweet and sour smell of a public use bin, but also hints at the transitional process of digestion, re-staging our relationship to such containers. Lupo thus alters the readymade to bring it to our attention,

not to change its character but rather to underscore and activate our relationship to this object.

B. Wurtz has been making sculptural assemblages using everyday objects since the early 1970s. Wurtz collects inexpensive objects with use value, things that relate to the most basic of human needs such as food, clothing and shelter; or sleeping, eating and insulating. These inexpensive objects typically include plastic bags, tins and kitchen utensils, occasionally used by the artist or gifted from friends. What is vital, however, is the experience of play involved in the process of assemblage, to arrive at a balance where qualities inherent to the chosen objects are not overshadowed by the newfound elegance of the final composition.

Manfred Pernice makes sculptures out of standardised and mass-produced building materials, such as pressboard or woodcore plywood, found objects and photocopied information and pictures. Pernice frequently returns to the form of the cylindrical column, referred to by the artist as 'Dosen' (cans). This focus stems from an interest in the human drive to systematise and regulate – to contain and control – through conventions and norms. Pernice uses his columns to display an array of surprising objects, articulating the column as both sculpture and support structure, not quite autonomous and not quite functional, but a bridge between.

Knut Henrik Henriksen also makes work that questions standards, utilising standardised materials, sizes and preexisting architectures to reveal doubt and vulnerabilities in that which appears stable and settled. In his wallpaper sculptures however, he abandons any grasp on stable matter. The paper sculptures are made of a variety of differently textured and coloured wallpaper. Pieces of material have been cut, folded and glued together in what appears like a spontaneous flow. These abstract sculptures are anti-monumental in their size and fragility. But as the human eye never ceases in its desire to know what it sees, these objects become buildings and humorous figures.

The works in *Happy Mechanics* are never resting, they are alive and active in their ambiguous and multiple presences. There is a shared emphasis on the relationship between object and material, a method of reappropriation, reusing and recycling of functional and/or mass-produced objects and materials. The works bring together the ordinary, the extraordinary and the absurd to test limits of order, logic and the lack of both. Spending time with these works, the joy found in colour and material gives way to layers of emotional and political depth.

Lubaina Himid's carts are restless objects, vessels ready to transport us through time and space, a reminder of an uncomfortable past and complex present. Pieces from an orange crate speak not only to the trade and travel of oranges from warmer climates, but bring to mind broader channels of exchange, circulation and migration. Meticulously painted insects, animals and fish decorate the inside of these vessels,

providing an allegory for the movement of species through commercial trade routes.

Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt is known for his involvement in the Stonewall riots as well as for his artistic practice, where he utilises materials such as tinsel, foil, cellophane, plastic wrap and glitter to make objects and installations that he identifies as 'knick-knacks'. Despite initially making work in America during the height of Minimalism, Lanigan-Schmidt's world is a world of excess, full of jewel-like objects and large installations that embrace the kitsch and tacky. Lanigan-Schmidt communicates from the inside out, speaking to his experience of being simultaneously gay and a believer in Catholicism. His highly theatrical work mingles these distant communities, Catholic iconography meets queer subject matter.

Ellen Lesperance's *Fighting Amazon (Throwing Urn)* (2014) is a vessel of a different kind that draws inspiration from Greek Tanagra figurines created around 300 B.C. These figurines were placed in the grave of the deceased, carrying traits and attributes of the person, believing this would allow a peaceful transition into the next life. Lesperance solicits this transferrable quality of the object but with a focus on characteristics and attributes of strong female activists. Lesperance

asks of the object to conjure magic, to replicate the strength of these women for generations of women to come.

Born in Germany, Amelie von Wulffen is part of a post-postwar generation, one which contends with guilt and silence following the Nazi regime. Von Wulffen explores suppression through painting in different styles, not only on two-dimensional surfaces but also on familiar pieces of furniture such as tables, chairs and other domestic items. In these paintings, German folklore, figures from children's books, monstrous, imaginary creatures and autobiography are applied to produce dream-like scenarios, familiar and homely yet laden with repressed traumas that linger in the personal and collective subconscious.

There is expansion both horizontally and vertically in *Happy Mechanics*. Across surfaces, objects are used metonymically to connote realism, through depth, others probe subjectivity, psychology and the subconscious. Throughout the exhibition, the body is a lingering, at times foregrounded, presence. There is a sense of each artist busying themselves in the studio or the home; gluing, drawing, assembling, moving around, rearranging objects – finding joy in materials.



Happy Mechanics: Part 2

Analgesic metaphors shaken from a fold; so much weightlessness and density. The mechanics of modernity rise from dust breeding, immortalised through the release of a shutter. From spooned words – happiness cannot be made concrete through uttered speech alone. A confluence of activity is performed to recoup hope from a dreamscape of possibility.

If plastic forces can be distinguished, it is not because living matter exceeds mechanical processes, but mechanisms are not sufficient to be machines. A mechanism is faulty not for being too artificial to account for living matter, but for not being mechanical enough, for not being adequately machined.¹
— Gilles Deleuze

If the living organism folds and unfolds through deterioration or propagation, a machined mechanism could be seen as system of parameters, as gates and edges. As a compound proposition, *happy mechanics* is both a contradiction and a projection of subjectivity; a question and a desiring machine. At play, perhaps an intrinsic acknowledgment of the object's material immanence within the sphere of the artwork. *Happy mechanics* quickly becomes a brewed paradox; a set of knots roving within a crowded field of interpretation, a set of linkages probing understanding where the experience of the mechanical merges the methods of material production whilst alluding to a magical entanglement of sentiment and thing.

Gaps within language might also be seen as much as an outer edge or limit as the material of the thing itself. Words become concrete. When a thing is named or nameable, like the lived body becomes a mass of texture and matter when broken down into surface and systems – the *happy mechanics* of the object creates anthropomorphic constellations. The descriptive terms of language acting like zones of naming, moving the described object into a graspable space where it is ready and wide open in all its extensions: its literal materiality, implied image and suspended surface merge into a space of seductive potential. Poetry and art fall outside language's functional dependency – they are experiences of a more abstract kind of power. A gesture could also be a thing, an invisible crutch that holds you up, as significant as it is absent.

Language, then, is a climate with many variations. The word *jouissance*² – physical or intellectual ecstasy – rolls around the mouth, possessed with a bouncy onomatopoeic temptation. Lacan's psychoanalytic ideas

of *jouissance* are a complication, an attempt to touch on what the qualitative conditions of an encounter with the Thing or object might be and how this encounter affects the subject. The journey towards this moment is connected to the world of the thing, what is more material, if fleeting, than the potential of *jouissance*, what the thing *is* becomes an abstraction, an illusion almost, something to be sublimated. Writing on Lacan, Joan Copjec comments: 'jouissance is the route towards the thing, the object of desire. There is always pleasure in this detour – indeed this is what pleasure is, a movement rather than a possession, a process rather than an object'.³

Misadventure of desire at the hedges of jouissance, watched out for by an evil god. This drama is not as accidental as it is believed to be. It is essential: for desire comes from the Other⁴, and jouissance is located on the side of the Thing.⁵
— Jaques Lacan

For Lacan, *jouissance* and pleasure are competitive forces. For it is pleasure that sets limits to *jouissance*, pleasure is what binds incoherent life together.⁶ The *happy mechanics* of process then, or to put it another way: the immanence and the language of the surface, suggesting the mechanical thing as means to achieve or allude to a nirvana of an immaterial world, where transcendence provides hypothetical relief. Following the philosopher Hegel, the 'problem' of art then, is posed by the limits of access to the higher realm of aesthetic or spiritual understanding.⁷

In *Gender Trouble*⁸, Butler thinks through the possibilities presented by Lacan's structuralist psychoanalysis. She questions a dominance of the phallus in Lacan's writing, interpreting the 'phallus' as a construction, where the notion of performed gender is first inferred. For both Lacan and Butler, gender is unstable and troubled, full of anxiety, voids and masquerade.

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Beneath the surface of the sea, marine life is faltering, our existence has produced the age of the Anthro-pocene. Amelie von Wulffen's painted boxes offer a scenographic ambivalence to this predicament. Tense and knowing, the delicious introspection of the novelties on display are both ornamental and sculptural, they are not neutral but part of conflicted desire, a simulation of lack. The lens that permits a tiny change of pre-modern yearning for a subliminal relationship to the wonder of things, can only be felt through artefacts of the bygone; Romantic paintings, for example, that allude to the unknowable, to the *not now felt*. At the shoreline, the fluid and multi-sensitivities can't apprehend understanding with the same assuredness. Von Wulffen's objects belong in part to a notion of fetishism, to the mythology of ancient history and

the allegorical expression of intellectual ideas. Via the heat of touch, as things are undone, more is remade, von Wulffen is on top of the psychodrama of the prism refracting the thrown up debris whose only claim can be a simple mechanistic action in their moment of becoming.

Among the earliest known toys are small stone and clay balls or marbles. Marbles were found in a child's grave in Nagada, Egypt and date from 4000 B.C.

It has been suggested that the first wheels in existence came about as potter's wheels, a rudimentary machine. Where would we be, if wheels remained horizontal? The axis takes on a sharp responsibility.⁹

The sea, marine life and boats; passage; transiting persons by force sometimes by choice.

The mass-produced sweet wrapper and food foil tray is very far from the earliest known clay wheel. But the connection between the objects is closer, routed through an oral fixation – the wide open hole, the roundness, the algorithm of a cycle – clandestine as well as pragmatic. Vessels hold so many secrets. Sweet wrappers are hosted by hands or pockets and harvested on the street. A logical step then, to find these materials as part of the vocabulary of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, an artist pushing towards the limits of kitsch or the baroque, depending on your lens and plurality. Indebted to Catholic aesthetics, or catholic tastes – the beauty of the carnival, baroque drama of the church or the pedestrian nihilism of the street is reinvested into these queered sculptures. Turning cheap material into jewel-like manifestations permits the kitsch to be read through a social lens, celebrating the dual beauty of laboured mass production and authorship that inhabit these materials.

Like Lanigan-Schmidt, B. Wurtz also presents a corresponding figure of intimate portrayals evoking, with Beckett-like determination, the posture of the body. Through found plastic bags and mundane elements, he finds a delicate world of speaking within the three basic necessities of life: food, clothing and shelter. A deadpan *Untitled* (1997) gives little away – a plastic carrier bag takes on physical resemblance – a bag becomes body mass, wooden block perhaps heart, a chord hanging device, head, and so on. A single line of wooden doweling balances the weightless meat of the assemblage. A scrupulous set of decisions govern these humble figures functioning within the sphere of the materialist conversation of objects.

Paper is another stretchy material. An incubator of so much potential, transmission and growth. It is malleable and demonstrative, superficial and fibrous. It is also the material of experimentation, enveloping ideas as well as objects – always in the process of *something else* – also a wrapper, of ideas, and of things. Paper is an analogue beginning, a place where

the model begins to assume form. With regard to ideas, it is a democratic plane, an open space, laid to receive. Knut Henrik Henriksen uses remnant paper – the odds and ends – to form spontaneous and impossible skyscraper models, 'nervous sculptures' as he calls them, formed by hand. Building upwards, his towers are objects of literally fictionalised space. The mediated question is one of realness, where the eccentric shell of a suggested building space holds the same psychic energy as an eminent tower block.

A seven-metre line of containers made by Rubbermaid® BRUTE® have holes cut into their sides, creating porous apertures hosting chocolate, Babybel cheese, cheaply perfumed toilet roll and fresh and plastic cherries. The audience can interact with Nancy Lupo's *Train* (2015) – the work also suggestive of a moveable feast, with the potential to rove around the exhibition space as it sits on wheeled platforms; objects in transit. Some of the elements can also be eaten, meaning rhythms of apertures and swallowing, of texture and perforation intertwine as soft body cheese, cherry or chocolate are pressed against the tongue. *Train* embodies the ubiquity of the accessible or found *thing*, a work which morphs kinetic potential together with biological processes of transformation – just as Lupo's *Train* snakes, so too the intestine maps a route. There is mutual porosity and tactility: surfaces which belong to the body without solution or continuity but also biological architecture which exists independently of structure. The work traverses a conceptual practice of reaching for 'the people' with an open palm, with the literal, formal plasticity of its substance like the epidermis of real skin – subject to fluctuations, sensitive and revealing. As a construction of linked material invitations, the proposal to *dive in*, to *take from*, the offerings is inherently treacherous: a moment of undoing, a poisoning perhaps, but ultimately a libidinous cry to *let me play, let me play*.

In writing on toys, Marina Warner reflects on Baudelaire's interest in naming them "‘cette statuaire singulière” (this singular statutory), he was first a poet then an art critic ... and as a flâneur of the boulevards and the galleries, he adopted a language of aesthetics, treating toys as an unusual form of sculpture'.¹⁰

In a body of work entitled *Feast Wagons* (2015), Lubaina Himid takes a similar path. Her chosen objects, such as wooden drawers, skateboards, a child's wooden horse, become simultaneously assemblage, sculpture and painting. Part of an ongoing strategy of making – 'painting on wood' (their given vernacular) – takes on many forms within Himid's oeuvre. Also often working with *object trouvé*, surfaces are painted with insects, fish and reptiles, drawn upon for their symbolism of difference that are often side lined within the public imaginary. The objecthood of *Horsefly* (2015) harbours something of a space between the German word for the uncanny, *unheimlich* and the homely, *heimlich*.



A painted horsefly fills the entire inside of a child's trolley whilst large flowers adorn the sides. Parts of an orange crate have been added, both front and back, and a wooden toy horse sits at the front, in waiting, no harness. The assemblage has become a sculpture, making a proposition that simultaneously acts as a conduit for memory. This could be a reflection on childhood, whilst reminiscing upon the mechanics of play, a process whereby:

Somatic traces preserve the mana of the relic – like the soul-the aura-struggling to manifest itself in the plaything, and they possess the power to stir empathy in the beholder.¹¹
— Marina Warner

An instruction from the artist for hanging *Sleeve* (2016) is to place the work at the height of a 'short person like me'. A subjective instruction based on Hayley Tompkins' own body height, but one that gives a clue to her wider enquiry operating at the connective tissue of painting and sculpture in relationship to the body. In *Sleeve* a dismembered arm welcomes us to the logic of space – the work placed with mechanical intent, leans into the gallery, its semiotic power activated by the viewer. The rhythm of painting seemingly an intuitive act for Tompkins where the cloth of the garment

operates almost as a palette – a gateway to the act of painting, an event functioning across the pictorial, but also onto an expanded practice, into the three-dimensional. *The Shirt says I feel 1* (2021), this time hung to a taller body of 6 feet, has a painted stick reaching from its pocket. This dimensionality animates this work, bringing a body mechanics and opens a space for narrative imagining. Paint is used to find out about something, to do something. A performance of sorts, teeming with romance for an absent corpse not to be worn but perhaps evocative of a prosthesis. The split body a contemporary experience of self through a sense of fragmentation, a real condition of not only the logic of material mimesis, but towards an anxiety about the navigation of self within modern times.

A large-scaled wood particle 'can' is a holder of the archeology of stuff – a recurring principle for Pernice. These cans are also structural, the shape itself made up from small rectangles of board, half painted white, the other, with an industrial white coating. The different registers of making are evidenced through the shifts in material modes, from makeshift to highly mechanised. This 'can' also provides a surface, a 'plinth'. All surfaces are part of Pernice's question, for 'surface' is never neutral. The inside of the can carries secrets, in this case a chamber holding advertising for another kind of container, a leaflet promotion for garden

pop-up bags. In Pernice's work, there is a playful and material questioning of the props and status of things coded as art. The plinth itself a historical construct: *what are we doing?*, he seems to be asking. A visual democracy stubbornly reflecting on commodification held in dialectical tension with the visual pleasure and cultural value found within the mass-produced and readily consumable. This is heightened by the display on top. A hand-made, quasi-abstract sculptural element is contrasted with small plastic toys from the Smurf franchise. Here we find Molly, a Smurfette who dislikes gossip. Smurfs were an almost Dada-esque invention through play and mistranslation; through mis-hearing, chance becomes a productive mechanism – the gossipy dinner table, the place of Molly's invention. Here, then, language and games are deliberately at cross purpose. The seriousness of play, the elevation of childishness, routed through a social labyrinth via objects creating an uncanny set of reactions indebted to Duchamp or Broodthaers.

... and

At the Broodthaers Society (New York), Ellen Lesperance showed clay figures cast as protesters. She is described as 'a multidisciplinary artist working with the legacies and haptic skill sets of feminism'. Her work offering a *punctum*, the plasticity of clay and the mechanics of the hand shaping out the form of a woman, gently bringing a counter-narrative with no metaphorical intent. These women sculptures are inspired by Amazon Tanagras¹², an artefact, connecting to another mode of secularism – the source Tanagras depicting everyday women from the 3rd century BCE. Then as now, these women featured clothing, their daily activities and gestures, the figurines found in graves in east-central Greece in the 19th century. The movement of knowledge and thing, through not only the archaeology of time, but the mechanics of statehood and appropriation. A reordering and repurposing, the redrafting of historical position. The whispering of who and what was traded, when and how? Lesperance brings votive appreciation to these women, collapsing timelines. A material presencing the lived experience of womanhood, both past and present; Lesperance expresses through the lens of politicised contemporary women. As one story feeds into another, a layer crackles against another material. Molly the Smurfette has radical potential, a matriarch drawn into dialogue with other forms of fictionalised and documented lived experience. Lesperance's figures speak across to *A Drag Queen's Shoulders in the Dawn* (1969) by Lanigan-Schmidt. It's all about position, jostling in the crowd, a confluence of understanding.

If language-play folds through Pernice's *Molly* (2017), Stuart Sherman's *Eleventh Spectacle* (*The Erotic*) (1979) also relies on the slippages found in speech. A table of objects used to perform, or create, an inversion of scale – a nod perhaps to the paper

theatres of the 19th century and their miniaturisation of theatrical spectacle. Here too, the haptic quality of the object rustles and resonates. The Perspex screen, the playing cards, the helicopter toy, the inventory of objects – all of them interact with a modernity where the recurring essence of materials is such that their readability, even through the filter of early video, becomes recalibrated. The poetics of expression are cognisant of the built world's eroticism; tactile sensibilities have taught hands that surface is not so far removed from the epidermis of the human body. It is through tireless exploration that the mechanics of material debris receives activation – the happy wheels, the oiled parts, digested matter, that make the world turn. Substance, action, surface and adornment are prescient vitalities, indexes of the intricacies at stake amongst the order of things.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibnitz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988/2015), 8.

² Following Lacan, see: <https://www.lacanonline.com/2015/07/what-does-lacan-say-about-jouissance>

³ Joan Copjec, *UMBR(a): Polemos*, 2001.

⁴ "The Other – the Other as the Law – is a metaphor for prohibition rather than the cause of it. What looks like a prohibition from the Other is actually an impossibility of accessing the jouissance of the Thing". Jacques Lacan, *Identification, Seminar IX*, 1962. Translated by Cormac Gallagher.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 853.

⁶ *Ibid*, 821.

⁷ See: G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990/2006).

⁹ Evidence indicates they were created to serve as potter's wheels around 3500 B.C. in Mesopotamia – 300 years before one understood how to use them for chariots.

¹⁰ Marina Warner, 'Out of an Old Toy Chest', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 43, no. 2, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 7.

¹² Tanagras were made in terracotta using press moulds with posterior holes/vents, a process of making followed by Lesperance.

List of Works

- A Manfred Pernice
<anexo> 2 (2013)
Spray paint and enamel paint on frame
42.5 × 42.5 × 4 cm
Installation view *BRÜCKE2*, The Modern
Institute, 3 Aird's Lane, Glasgow, 2017
Courtesy the artist and The Modern
Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
- B Manfred Pernice
Molly (2017)
Various woods, plastic, ceramic, paper, paint
155 × 70 × 70 cm
Installation view *BRÜCKE2*, The Modern
Institute, 3 Aird's Lane, Glasgow, 2017
Courtesy the artist and The Modern
Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
- C Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt
Lasagna Pans (CA. 1990)
Aluminium foil tray, pipe cleaners,
plastic wrap, staples, and other mixed media
34 × 28 cm
- D Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt
Tribute to Vladimir Tatlin (1970)
Foil, plastic wrap, pipe cleaner, linoleum,
glitter, acrylic paint, acrylic floor shine
and food colouring, staples, magic marker,
tinsel, printed material and found objects
40.6 × 28 × 25.4 cm
Image courtesy the artist, Pavel Zoubok Gallery,
New York and Jan Kaps, Cologne
- E Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt
A Drag Queen's Shoulder In the Dawn (1969)
Foil, plastic wrap, linoleum, glitter, cellophane,
staples, acrylic paint, found objects,
and other media
27.9 × 16.5 × 14 cm
Image courtesy the artist, Pavel Zoubok Gallery,
New York and Jan Kaps, Cologne
- F Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt
Lollipop Knick-Knack
(High Knee Butchy Buns) (1970)
Foil, printed material, linoleum, glitter,
cellophane, staples, acrylic paint,
found objects and other media
22.9 × 17.2 × 12.1 cm
Image courtesy the artist, Pavel Zoubok Gallery,
New York and Jan Kaps, Cologne

- G Lubaina Himid
Tegu Lizard (Feast Wagon) (2015)
Skateboard, drawer, acrylic
60 × 27.5 × 19 cm
- H Lubaina Himid
Horsefly (Feast Wagon) (2015) detail
Metal trolley, part of orange crate,
drawer, wooden horse, acrylic
158 × 21 × 50 cm
- I Knut Henrik Henriksen
Monument Without a Cause (2009)
Wallpaper
55 × 7 × 10 cm
- J Knut Henrik Henriksen
Monument Without a Cause (2013)
Wallpaper
60 × 10 × 7 cm
- K Nancy Lupo
Train (2015)
Three 55-gallon Rubbermaid® Brute® containers,
two 32-gallon Wisconsin Badgers Rubbermaid®
Brute Containers, two 32-gallon Huskee
containers, two 32-gallon Rubbermaid® Brute®
containers (vented), toilet paper, real cherries,
fake cherries, chocolate soccer balls,
quail eggs, Babybel cheese, red plastic liners,
and Rubbermaid® Brute® trainable dolly system
94 × 765 × 78 cm
- L B. Wurtz
Untitled (1997)
Plywood, plastic bag, wooden doll, rope
61 × 97.8 cm
Image courtesy the artist
and Kate MacGarry, London
- M B. Wurtz
Untitled (2018)
Wood, picture wire, screws, tin can, plastic
cup, drinking straws, buttons, thread
86 × 21.5 × 21.5 cm
Image courtesy the artist
and Kate MacGarry, London
- N Ellen Lesperance
Fighting Amazon (Throwing Urn) (2014)
Pigmented slip on terracotta, compost-dyed silk
30.4 × 11.4 × 11.4 cm
- O Amelie von Wulffen
Untitled (Tree hugger) (2017–20)
Oil on canvas
100 × 80 cm
Image courtesy the artist and
Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin
- P Amelie von Wulffen
Untitled (2020) detail
Oil on plywood, ceramics, shells, mirror,
silver, acrylic, moss and papier-mâché
60 × 120 × 50.5 cm
- Q Stuart Sherman
Selections from the Eleventh Spectacle
(The Erotic) (1979)
Video (still), 20 min, colour, sound
Image courtesy Electronic Art Intermix (EAI),
New York
- R Hayley Tompkins
Sleeve (2016)
Acrylic paint on cotton
66 × 18.7 × 9 cm
Image courtesy the artist and The Modern
Institute / Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
- S Hayley Tompkins
The Shirt Says I Feel 1 (2021)
Acrylic, shirt, stick
81 × 12 × 12 cm

Molly (2017) is one of a series of wooden cylindrical columns titled *Dosen*. What these 'cans' contain is pointedly superfluous, the minimalist panelled and painted exterior of *Molly* is ornamented with an articulated heap of miniatures: a territorial Smurf; a toadstool abode; a plastic rosebud. For children, these might be trash or treasure – momentary collectibles hyped and traded within their own neighbourly economy. These toys congregate around a fanciful silvery-melty property of lumpen, thumbled clay. Though seemingly individuated by such decoration, *Molly*, and the clusters of Pernice's *cans* more broadly, revels in wilful marginality. In this sense the *cans* are of incidental, banal and abject specificity. The column-stump is an object progressively effaced of function yet synced to latent readings as some inferred prop: a code to facilitate a kind of production or a segment of architectural scenery to quietly organise movement. Twinned with the flair of trash and tchotchkes, the work insists on ephemeral notice, evoking novelties of the garage-sale or bargain bucket. Pernice's *Molly* ultimately discards the impulse to subsume objects – even and especially in their potential meaninglessness – in context, codes, patterns and a pathological insistence to make sense. Pernice disturbs the illusion of an object's coherency without succumbing to the readymade, allowing any well-defined habit or purpose to slip away – speaking to the irresolute and inexplicable nature of experience, no matter how contained.

<anexo> 2 (2013) is part of several wall-based works by Pernice which reflect on the relationship between objects, the viewer and their environment. Each work is a uniform, discrete square, titled numerically and typically installed at the same height, to be contemplated in succession. In their consistent framing, these works annex Pernice's methodology of dismantling systems of regulation, allowing other, more capricious, readings to surface. Several of these works include loose scraps of kitschy fabric, images of Pernice's own sculptures, or newspaper clippings reporting narratives of demolition and the destruction of waste. While these might evoke secondary, peripheral particularity, the gesture of <anexo> 2 signals a response to the containment of the frame itself. Black spray paint tarnishes both image and frame, collapsing distinctions of both through a bodily gesture that hinges on a medium both permanent and portable. In graffiti, one may see a different kind of value system, characterised by independency, risk and the loaded affect of 'vandalism'. Its scrawl is an uncontainable gesture which locates a hand, a figure, in abstraction while simultaneously claiming disregarded space through a litany of names, marks or signs.

Manfred Pernice's sculptures share a preoccupation with disarticulating the reductive logic of containment. The container, emblematic of industrialised production and international trade, circulates in the networked space of commerce, enabled by an infrastructure of weathered steel, sluggish foundations and reinforced concrete. Pernice utilises the limited dynamic of standardisation and organisation through a specific use of building materials, such as particle board, concrete, plywood and masonite. These elected, base materials are used against themselves and the function of 'making sense', each deferring their formal certainties and legibility of 'purpose'. As Pernice says: 'What one usually perceives are contexts that make sense – never or seldom contexts of non-sense ... In seeking intelligibility, these nonsensical situations usually go unnoticed, even though life is full of them.'





The sculptures of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt are objects of devotion, informed by the casual reminiscences and critical experiences as a gay youth of the New York LGBTQIA+ community during the 1960s. Raised in New Jersey by a German and Irish Catholic family, Lanigan-Schmidt moved to New York where he found social refuge in the political crucible of the Stonewall Inn. As one of the few living veterans of the Stonewall riots, Lanigan-Schmidt commemorates those historic actions in his 1989 prose poem *Mother Stonewall and Golden Rats*, imagining himself, friends and fellow bar patrons as 'street rats'. With its colloquial associations, these 'golden rats' speak to Lanigan-Schmidt's uneasy fusion of the precious, ecclesiastical and devotional with the trashy, ecstatic and superfluous. In his home-spun objects, tokens and installations, Lanigan-Schmidt preserves the vitality and sincerity of political gay life through religious reverence. Objects such as chalices, tabernacles, crowns, shrines and altars are fabricated from all that shimmers: glitter, foil, tinsel, aluminium pans, sweet wrappers, floor shine. In *Lollipop Knick-Knack (High Knee, Butchy Buns)* (1970), tinsel and pipe cleaners create a curlicue frame for a snippet of soft-porn. Lanigan-Schmidt's *Lasagna Pans* (1990) meanwhile, are dense with decoration, the pans become portals or gemstone caverns reminiscent of the lacquered finishes of medieval enamels.

Lanigan-Schmidt's collision of homosexuality and faith describes a kind of transcendence available precisely through the material and life of the world around us. The glitter reminiscent of shimmering street queens is sprinkled upon bibelots inlaid with cherubs; clippings from gay magazines among self-portraits, nudes and scraps of text conjure allegories as queenly timestamps for gay life. The sincere panache of Lanigan-Schmidt's work ultimately owes its execution to the effeminate. As Lanigan-Schmidt recalls of his early practice: 'This was the world of Frank Stella's copper paintings. It was all about these big, macho, expensive expressions made with the entire arm. I was more about the wrist, like how people would make fun of gays. I wanted my art to be very consciously about delicate wrist movements. So I made those copper paintings into earrings.'





D

E



Lubaina Himid's *Feast Wagons* (2015) feature a number of handmade carts and other transportation objects. These works are assembled from found objects such as old wooden carts, drawers and skateboards. Of various dimensions, they are each decorated and embellished with numerous painted motifs including patterned fragments, beetles, spiders, fish, snails, flies, snakes and several other animal species. Collectively, the series of objects were inspired by the earliest moving picture of horse-drawn carriages crossing Leeds bridge (the works were initially exhibited at the Tetley Gallery, Leeds, in 2015). Himid's individual ornamentation of insects, fish and reptiles are chosen for their symbolism of alterity, their often-unnoticed or loathed presence in the public imaginary despite their essential contribution to natural ecosystems.

In *Tegu Lizard (Feast Wagon)* (2015), for instance, Himid insinuates a pun in the juxtaposition of a painted tegu lizard within a drawer, now equipped for movement courtesy of a small skateboard. Other selected organisms of Himid's *Feast Wagons* include the Simulium Equinum – a black fly which drinks the blood of horses; Cyrtus Gibbus – a large fly whose larvae are parasitic to spiders; and the Ribbon Sawtail Fish (*Idiacanthus Fasciola*) – found around the world at depths of over 500 metres, its larvae possess large feet at the extremities of which the eyes are found.

Selecting obscure creatures and transposing them as elements of performative trading carts, Himid places agricultural trade in dialogue with the migration of people – making visible life that is often overlooked. In summoning the history of migration networks, the carts indicate postcolonial commentary in the trade of non-commercial goods and, in certain instances, the extraction and ferrying of non-indigenous species. Here, Himid uses paint to superimpose alterity and numerous life forms, otherwise historically erased from the mythologising narrative of colonialism and globalisation.





33 PROD. EN ESPAÑA



MIFER HNOS, S.A. 466

Knut Henrik Henriksen

Knut Henrik Henriksen's paper sculptures initially appear as maquettes for utopian, or otherwise impossible, architecture. Titled *Monument Without a Cause* and developed since 2003, Henriksen's architectonic models are fabricated from cut and collaged wallpaper, their title suggesting an innate purposelessness and monumentalising of lack. These sculptures were initially conceived in response to creating large-scale, expensive and often bureaucratic projects. The rolls of store-bought wallpapers are both economical and readily available, allowing for impulsive creation while evidencing a certain insecurity or nervousness. As Henriksen says, 'a kind of hopelessness' pervades these delicate, imagined monuments – a frailty in which one finds an appealing counter-production. Henriksen notes: 'They frustrated me with their fragility. I don't know exactly what they are – they are "doubt", they are nonverbal. I don't know where I'm going with them, how they should be titled, or how to preserve them.' These wallpaper assemblages ultimately model both failings and feelings, their compositional uncertainty and material precarity are counterintuitive preservations of awkwardness.



Nancy Lupo often provides aesthetic attention toward banal, commercialised objects on the peripheries of everyday life, augmenting their affective power visually, formally and linguistically. These industrialised items are often utilitarian, economical or clinical, each registering different material properties and durabilities – tested, mutated, interwoven or undone through Lupo's intervention. The workaday hardness of these intensely manufactured and standardised objects – often for municipal and civic use – meets the perishable substances of equally industrialised food-stuffs. Lupo's *Train* (2015) is composed of a seven-metre-long sequence of Rubbermaid® BRUTE® bins. These containers are produced in a range of sizes, from 10 gallons to 55 gallons, and with five colour variations. As objects of waste management, they are ever-present to the point of invisibility – found in hospitals, parks, schools, prisons, churches, they are both everywhere and nowhere. Lupo denatures these bins through a slow process of perforation, creating an energy entirely at odds with their original design. These durable vessels are now made leaky and porous; each hole filled with other commodities: real and fake cherries, Babybel cheeses, chocolate footballs, quails eggs and scented toilet paper rolls.

The forced permeation of these substances – rubbery cheese, robust plastic, brittle eggshell – encourages unlikely material receptions and formal crosscurrents. Material excess and consumer waste meets functional properties of standardised units and spatial organisation. These additive embeddings of matter are instances of profusion and visceral satisfaction within the very fabric of structures characterised by blunt practicality. Lupo's modelling of porosity engenders the sculpture's newfound mutability as *Train* requires frequent replenishing, where acts of caretaking enhance physical intimacy. With their punctured surface, Lupo's connected bins create new anatomies – whether in the vertebral structure of the total sculpture or in their minor material penetrations. Each bin stands in relation to the equally pervious body, recognising that both entities are mutually enveloped within an ever-changing environment.





L

B. Wurtz notes that he chooses materials based on sleeping, eating and shelter. Though a system of bricolage, Wurtz brings together disparate objects that, in their arrangements, articulate meaning and create narrative. Oftentimes, found objects are presented unadulterated – it's in juxtaposition that slippage and tension occurs. In recent solo exhibitions such as *Selected Works 1970–2015* at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK, a larger array of methods of making were on view – from early video pieces to works that harbour biographical detail. Of the baby boomer generation, Wurtz's cultural references are rooted in the post-war consumer boom in the US and the phantasmagorical quality of cheap, throwaway items and the funfair palette of factory-

made goods. In *Untitled* (1997), a monastic quality is brought to a 'portrait' consisting of plywood, a plastic bag, wooden doll, and rope. The knotted and the flattened bag could be from your boat or garden shed, the lack of fuss in the arrangement allows a concentration on the formal and material conditions. *Untitled* (2018) presents a mobile sculpture, made from wood, picture wire, screws, a tin can, a plastic cup, drinking straws, buttons, and thread. The materials are crucial; they open up the works to emphatic recollection: *oh those remind me of or I use those screws in ...* The viewer participates with their subjectivity. Like basics Wurtz relies upon to give parameters to his material choices, the works on view in *Happy Mechanics* articulate the surfaces of building itself.



Ellen Lesperance makes work that commemorates the subjectivity and ideology of women protesters without depicting the actual subject. *Fighting Amazon (Throwing Urn)* (2014) is inspired by Greek Tanagra figurines, specifically a pair of Amazon Tanagras that the artist saw in the Princeton Art Museum Collection in New Jersey. These figurines, made of terracotta, were found in graves in east-central Greece in the 19th century. Although not portraits, the figurines typically depict everyday women from around the time of 300 B.C. Historians believe these objects were given postures, gestures and clothing of the deceased so that these attributes would bring comfort – allowing the deceased to carry forth something from their old life into next world. These figurines are thus believed to be imbued with a performative potential, the potential to transfer personal traits into the future.

Lesperance has made a series of figurines, all women, from across time and space. These include ancient Amazon and Egyptian warriors as well as contemporary activists such as Pussy Riot (a Moscow-based feminist punk rock group who enact protests and performance art), FEMEN (an international women's movement of topless female activists whose goal is to protect women's rights) and specifically, Amina Tyler (a female Tunisian activist of FEMEN). Lesperance's focus on activist women pays tribute to their brave acts while also perpetuating the past and present into the future, instilling hope that the fighting spirit of these women can be passed on to future generations of women.



Amelie von Wulffen's *Untitled (Tree hugger)* (2017–20) depicts a scene within a landscape. Two women are gathered beside a tree, one is dressed in an Aran wool sweater and a colourful scarf, she embraces the tree while her head, a colourful blob, has become one with the scarf. The other, portrayed to represent the artist herself (Wulffen often appears in her own work), faces us with an abstract gaze. Above her, an intimate scene is presented as if in a thought bubble. Here, one woman is propped up in what looks like a sickbed whilst the other stands beside the bed, looking up attentively as if signalling a willingness to care. The viewer is provided entry into a personal space, someone else's subconscious, while the landscape takes on a dual aspect: both a depiction of nature and a mental landscape. What is at play is equally ambiguous and multifold. The viewer is left to meander between memory and fantasy, dream and desire.

In *Untitled* (2020), a seascape has been painted onto a plinth-like box or chest, one side depicts two sailing boats pulling into the calm of a bay, the other shows a segment of land as it stretches out into the ocean. The romantic nature of this seascape – the horizon parting blue water from blue sky, white clouds mirrored on the still surface of the water – hints at German Romanticism with its emphasis on the unconscious. Wulffen is interested in the German psyche and particularly the inherited silence of post-war Germany. The water over which the boats sail can be seen as an image of psychic investigation. Upon the box is a display of little seashell figures, adding a sparkle of dark humour while hinting at the human impulse to control, categorise and anthropomorphise animals and objects. The eye travels across the cute and comical figures – a moss garden spreads out among the seashell figures, adding another textural quality – to settle on the horizon. Does peace and happiness lie beyond the horizon or is it promised through the clearing in the mood-stricken sky?







An avant-garde performer working across film and video as well as writing poetry and plays, Stuart Sherman is foremost known for his *Spectacle* performances, created from 1975 to 1994. Merging avant-garde theatre with conceptual art practices, Sherman developed a visual, performative practice which he described as having a 'literary bent – (I) consider everything I do a form of writing.' Sherman's *Spectacles* usually took the form of fast-paced, choreographed interactions with small, mundane objects over a folding table, performing eighteen of such *Spectacles* over the course of his lifetime. Sherman considered his performances as 'animated drawings' with his *Spectacles* assuming a slapstick humour and dead-pan interplay with objects. Despite a seemingly random array of items such as tape, toys, pennies, playing cards, a lightbulb and piggybank, Sherman's interactions are demonstrated as exercises with intent – encouraged in part by their evanescence, with each *Spectacle* lasting only a few

minutes. These performances are situated between order and disorder, symmetry and asymmetry, meaning and nonsense. With playful inversions of purpose, Sherman's objects are used in absurd and myriad ways to untangle their prior function and animate new relations between objects. For instance, a hammer mimics a hand in the act of playing piano keys, taped playing cards become faulty pedestals for miniature models, and a yellow lightbulb encircles the peripheries of the body. Titling these works ironically as *Spectacles*, Sherman allows a kind of modest action, otherwise rationalised as trivial or haphazard, to assume scale. Sherman's theatricality is characterised by the slight, witty and gestural, spotlighting minutiae in the palm of his hand. As a practice which relates to modes of writing, Sherman's short performances adopt words-as-objects. These *Spectacles*, then, relate to a disarticulation of syntactical logic, where symbolism, function and structure are promptly untangled and reformulated.



Hayley Tompkins

Hayley Tompkins writes of painting: 'The painting is always a substitute / It is made to be seen and is aware / It has it's own built-in mechanism that measures time / It's a form of optical research.' Tompkins' practice draws attention to the boundary between reality and painting, utilising objects with anonymous histories such as shirt sleeves, spoons, hammers and sticks. In both *Sleeve* (2016) and *The Shirt Says I Feel 1* (2021), Tompkins elects modest shirts as material for painting, bridging the pictorial and physical. These selected materials speak to Tompkins' expanded sense of content, which she describes as something previously 'seen, thought, felt, dreamed of, which is then being re-constructed or re-imagined. I make these things to loosely enmesh myself in reality and to express positive doubt.' Tompkins's 'positive doubt' is generatively expressed in an understanding of the painted object as an interval in time and space. Her 'optical research' involves events of colour which appeal to everyday items and layered gestures, encouraging an intuitive relationship with the body.

A sleeve, shorn from its original shirt, is absorbed by blues and greys, daubed in yellow, peach and green. The *Sleeve*, pressed to mimic a more conventional surface, is given time and dimension through the saturation of colour. As a painted fragment, Tompkins' *Sleeve* invites her understanding of object-as-interval – their pause in time creating a fragmentary notational system which might be best addressed through feeling and remembering. The painted shirt is an active remnant of Tompkins' exploration of how painting works, how singularities and certain moments collect across its polychromatic surface. With objects decoupled from context, Tompkins' works consider the potential of painting-in-the-world – a process of durational thinking and exploring.



Happy Mechanics
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Knut Henrik Henriksen, Lubaina Himid,
Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Ellen Lesperance,
Nancy Lupo, Manfred Pernice, Stuart Sherman,
Hayley Tompkins, Amelie von Wulffen, B. Wurtz

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