

*Benjamin Verdonck* (Benjamin Verdonck)

Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

Published in *Artforum*, XLVIII, n° 6, February 2010, p. 218

(translated from French by Molly Stevens)



shadows make the allegorical binaries explicitly solar—a point emphasized by the series title “A Place in the Sun (Shadows).” Sun/shadow is also origin/repetition (the vanished radiators and surfboards versus the shadows and signatures), and, ultimately, truth/error—therefore the possibility of knowledge, and interpretation from beginning to end. “The Belgian Marbles” offers a most exacting allegory of tropes, which belies any first sense of blasé chic, and confirms that Reena Spaulings continues to operate at the highest level of theoretical and stylistic sophistication.

—David Lewis

#### ANTWERP, BELGIUM

### Benjamin Verdonck

TIM VAN LAERE GALLERY

The Belgian artist Benjamin Verdonck is best known for multidisciplinary projects in theaters, but in recent years he has also entered the stage of the visual arts, with performances as well as presentations in the context of exhibitions. Recently, under the title “On the Way to Work,” Verdonck featured a group of his visual art projects, all attesting to the transitions he effects between stage and gallery, action and object.

This passage from gesture to material was made evident even in the exhibition's title, which immediately suggested that the artist's project resides in a creative process envisioned as a whole: its occasion, the time one devotes to it, the collaborations it calls for, the enjoyment one finds in it, and the objects it ultimately produces. It is along this entire spatiotemporal line that Verdonck's work operates—a line he does not hesitate to run along in both directions, with the action, having become an object, sometimes becoming an action again.

The exhibition primarily consisted of models in cardboard, paper, plaster, and wood. At once sophisticated and fragile, they represent a sensibility that is equally elusive, a fondness for disguise and metamorphosis, an affinity with the worlds of the circus and the fair. Beyond their amusing, baroque, ephemeral character and their colorful appeal, these models touch with great subtlety on the individual's relationship to his or her socioeconomic environment, or at least to the one proposed by consumer culture, especially advertising. *Leef zoals je wilt* (Live How You Want To), 2007, for example, draws its inspiration from the logo and slogan of a Belgian supermarket chain, mocking the store by giving it the appearance of a fairy-tale castle or a gift box; this in order to suggest the kind of ready-made happiness the company claims to deliver every day to its customers, a cruel fantasy given the harsh realities most people face.

Other models, such as *On the Way to Work*, 2009, consider the complex commercialization of the private sphere, which is also to say the thorny question of knowing what position to take as a creative person, both with regard to the sources of one's inspiration and to one's public image and the market; the dilemma escalates when one bases one's production on a seemingly priceless material, that is, life itself—a material that, what's more, one inevitably betrays in trying to catch hold of it.

In addition to the models, the exhibition also included groupings of photographs with texts, assemblages similar to synopses of brief performances taking place in other times and places. In a tone at once serious and mocking, reminiscent of the one adopted in his time by Bas Jan Ader, these works deal with the artist's political commitment (*An Artwork for a Nice White Gallery*, 2004), as well as the vanity of every system of individual improvement (*At the Count of Three I Can Disappear*, 2006). In the end, seeing the profusion of ethical and aesthetic issues Verdonck touches on and the skill with which he handles them, one can only hope he continues along the path that he has intuitively opened up between theatrical art and visual art: the way of a tightrope walker.

—Yoann Van Parys

Translated from French by Molly Stevens

#### GRONINGEN, THE NETHERLANDS

### Folkert de Jong

GRONINGER MUSEUM

Since 2001, Folkert de Jong has been working with Styrofoam and polyurethane foam, the now common insulation materials produced by Dow Chemical—whose laboratories also, of course, produced napalm and dioxin. This dubious backdrop, together with the materials' hazards to health and environment, contrasts deeply with the institution's characteristically innocent blue or pink coloring. Although lightweight and even vulnerable, these foams will probably outlast bronze and marble. De Jong deliberately engages such contradictions. Confronting the materials' positive poles (friendly colors, lightness) with dark and complex social, historical, and political subject matter, the artist creates life-size tableaux in which figures derived from comics, horror movies, art, and history often converge in sinister ways.

For his first substantial museum show, “Circle of Trust: Selected Works, 2001–2009,” a representative selection of work from 2001 to the present was assembled, including sixty-eight drawings shown for the first time. De Jong's most recent installation piece, created especially for the Groninger Museum, is titled *Infinite Silence: The Way Things Are and How They Became Things*, 2009, and consists, like its title, of three rather isolated elements: pallets with stacks of church bells; five stately statues of Abraham Lincoln standing side by side with wagon wheels standing upright in between them; and poles of wood, like leftovers from a construction site. All are cast in polyurethane, with the addition of pigments of unnatural, often fluorescent hues. Both the bells (for which an original seventeenth-century mold was used) and the statesman represent turbulent histories; the scrap could refer to the potential to construct and manipulate such

Folkert de Jong.  
*The Peckhamian Mimic, Fourth and Fifth Commandment* (detail), 2007. Styrofoam and pigmented polyurethane foam, 26" 2" x 19" 8" x 6" 6".



first venture with Styrofoam (also on view), the newest installation is decidedly more tranquil, more introverted. In fact, the artist had already abandoned the bizarre, the sinister, and the grotesque with the melancholic acrobats, musicians, and clowns in mind. Suffused with a seems to prevail with de Jong's subjects now, and which entice the viewer to focus on their materiality. Quite rightly so, for in the nine years under review in this show, the artist's ever-increasing virtuosity with his noxious “anti-material” is manifest. Moreover, he has become a precise stage director, eschewing the unfinished quality of his early along with the other works here seemed somewhat out of place. The artist almost obsessively draws scenes from history, including compositional studies for the installations that are on view; their exploratory and was abundantly offset by the polished orchestration of the show foam has become less visible over the years, yet it continues to be the main protagonist of his work.

—Saskia van der Kroef

#### MOSCOW

### Alexander Brodsky

WINZAVOD CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Architects often aspire to build something larger than life, appreciated by multitudes. But bigness can also be banal—hulking residential developments that exemplify bare necessity in dense urban space—or even threatening, a reminder of the individual's weakness. These side effects nels critical thoughts on his trade in sculptures and installations. *Night Before the Attack*, 2009, co-organized by the Winzavod Center for Contemporary Art and M+J Guelman Gallery, was his most recent dramatization of the emotive associations of structure and scale. The long vaults of a nineteenth-century winery's defunct storage cellar, with a total area of some twenty-six-thousand square feet, were scattered with nearly a hundred shin-high, filmy plastic tents. Each was illuminated from within by pinkish bulbs; their light flickered as it hit thin strips of paper fluttering over small fans. White plaster figurines—mini-monuments with angular heads suggestive of prehistoric statuary—huddled pensively in groups of two or more over the simulated campfires. Brodsky's programmatic title instructed viewers to read the tableau as a settler's mobilization in the face of danger. The tents and figurines thus constitute a kind of three-dimensional rendering of history painting, with the theatrical qualities of the environment compensating for absent details of setting and period. Abstract theatrical tension was inherent in the way the darkness filled the high-ceilinged basement and encroached on the tents; it came from the contrast between the dark air and the points of warm light. When a structure outlives its functional use, other properties can come to the fore, and Brodsky deftly exploits this vulnerability to the imputation of a new symbolic value.

Other works by Brodsky were on view in Moscow concurrently with *Night Before the Attack*. An exhibition of conceptual architecture from the 1980s and early '90s at the Tretyakov Gallery included twelve of his finely detailed, whimsical etchings made in collaboration with Ilya Urkin, which inserted human characters into architectural drawings to narrate the alienating aspects of urban space. The Third Moscow Biennale at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture included Brodsky's *20 Trash Bins*, 2002, in which the glass-and-mirror

grid of a futuristic fantasy city spread inside rows of rusted Dumpsters. Interior and exterior engaged in a spatial monologue as the bins' crummy substance collided with the naive ambition of the toy city. Devises seen in these earlier works were employed again in *Night Before the Attack*: The basement ruins became a shabby shell that contained a narrative of vulnerability. The large scale presented Brodsky with new opportunity. This time, rather than modeling structures on the shrunken scale of between architecture's aspirations and realities, Brodsky lined a real relic of the past with an evocation of an uncertain future. As you walked among the mass repetition of identical figurines in near-identical tents, the present felt slower; the flicker of fake fire in the statues' motionless faces suspended the moment.

—Brian Draithe



Alexander Brodsky.  
*Night Before the Attack*, 2009. mixed media installation.

#### CLUJ, ROMANIA

### Ciprian Mureșan

GALERIA PLAN B

“If we wanna understand the Humans, we gotta see them at their lowest. The Evil—as they call it—that's what we study today.” This line is the protagonist's pessimistic view of humanity that opens Ciprian Mureșan's video *Dog Lau*, 2009, which premiered at the Romanian Pavilion in the Venice Biennale last year. Based on a script by Savianna Stănescu, *Dog Lau* was presented at Plan B alongside *Untitled (Tom Chamberlain)*, 2009, a video that teases out the titular English artist's painting practice. Mureșan's solo exhibition was the first in the gallery's new location within an old brush factory—a compound that brings together five galleries and twenty art, design, and performance studios. The artist's own studio is downstairs, as are those of three other gallery artists; Chamberlain had installed a group of paintings in the artist-run space Laika next door. This cooperative setup has filled an urgent need. Romania still lacks cultural infrastructure; rather than wait for the authorities to act, a core group of artists independently collaborated to take over several floors of the factory. At Plan B, the pairing of *Dog Lau*, which deals both with the fragile teacher/student relationship and with human character more broadly, and *Untitled*, which finds the artist working as lone warrior, made perfect sense as a self-critique from within the collective.

Stănescu's dramatic text about humanity's horrific appetite for torture, interrogation, and execution is played out in *Dog Lau* by five beautifully handcrafted puppets of dogs. Măldog, the leader and teacher of the pack, encourages his students to recite the names of various forms of torture practiced throughout history. They do so willingly, rapidly firing off a list that includes stoning, crucifixion, genocide, and waterboarding. He goes on to specify that “the backwoods spelling of DOG as GOD is not completely arbitrary.” But it does not take long before his disciples have turned upon him and the play becomes one about the act of torture rather than his theory.

*Dog Lau* was presented to the left of the space, and to balance its dark intent, Mureșan seems to have looked to the angel on his right shoulder to find Tom Chamberlain. An accomplished painter, Chamberlain



The Belgian artist Benjamin Verdonck is best known for multidisciplinary projects in theaters, but in recent years he has also entered the stage of the visual arts, with performances as well as presentations in the context of exhibitions. Recently, under the title “On the Way to Work,” Verdonck featured a group of his visual art projects, all attesting to the transitions he effects between stage and gallery, action and object.

This passage from gesture to material was made evident even in the exhibition’s title, which immediately suggested that the artist’s project resides in a creative process envisioned as a whole: its occasion, the time one devotes to it, the collaborations it calls for, the enjoyment one finds in it, and the objects it ultimately produces. It is along this entire spatiotemporal line that Verdonck’s work operates—a line he does not hesitate to run along in both directions, with the action, having become an object, sometimes becoming an action again.

The exhibition primarily consisted of models in cardboard, paper, plaster, and wood. At once sophisticated and fragile, they represent a sensibility that is equally elusive, a fondness for disguise and metamorphosis, an affinity with the worlds of the circus and

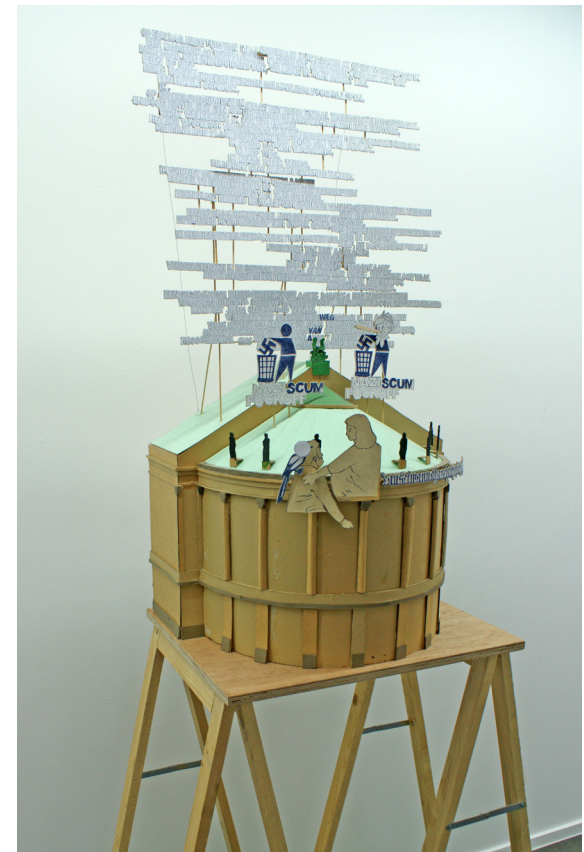




the fair. Beyond their amusing, baroque, ephemeral character and their colorful appeal, these models touch with great subtlety on the individual's relationship to his or her socioeconomic environment, or at least to the one proposed by consumer culture, especially advertising. *Leef zoals je wil* (Live How You Want To), 2007, for example, draws its inspiration from the logo and slogan of a Belgian supermarket chain, mocking the store by giving it the appearance of a fairytale castle or a gift box; this in order to suggest the kind of ready-made happiness the company claims to deliver every day to its customers, a cruel fantasy given the harsh realities most people face.

Other models, such as *On the Way to Work*, 2009, consider the complex commercialization of the private sphere, which is also to say the thorny question of knowing what position to take as a creative person, both with regard to the sources of one's inspiration and to one's public image and the market; the dilemma escalates when one bases one's production on a seemingly priceless material, that is, life itself—a material that, what's more, one inevitably betrays in trying to catch hold of it.

In addition to the models, the exhibition also included groupings of photographs





with texts, assemblages similar to synopses of brief performances taking place in other times and places. In a tone at once serious and mocking, reminiscent of the one adopted in his time by Bas Jan Ader, these works deal with the artist's political commitment (*An Artwork for a Nice White Gallery*, 2004), as well as the vanity of every system of individual improvement (*At the Count of Three I Can Disappear*, 2006).

In the end, seeing the profusion of ethical and aesthetic issues Verdonck touches on and the skill with which he handles them, one can only hope he continues along the path that he has intuitively opened up between theatrical art and visual art: the way of a tightrope walker.

