

TOBIAS REHBERGER: BLIND AND A LITTLE LESS

Christopher Moore

Galerie Urs Meile announces Tobias Rehberger's second solo-show with Galerie Urs Meile in China, following 2014's *Das Kind muss raus* 生 (*The child must go out* 生[born]). Drawing on his acclaimed exhibition this year at Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum (RAM), *If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry* (March 23 – May 26, 2019), Rehberger's Beijing show will include nine new works in the *Vase Portrait* series based on artists represented by the gallery, some 16 works from the *Infection* lamp series, as well as pixelated tableaux, and new *Planet* lamps that recall the *Sun* lamp at RAM.

One of the most influential artists of his generation, Rehberger (b. 1966, Esslingen am Neckar, Germany) has exhibited very widely, including in 2014 at his acclaimed *Home and Away and Outside* show at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, Germany. In 2009 Rehberger was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Artist in the *Fair Mondi / Making Worlds* exhibition, curated by Daniel Birnbaum at the 53rd Venice Biennale. Rehberger's practice is often described as investigating the intersections between art, design and architecture. In truth, this only scratches the optical surface of how Rehberger engages with the (art) world.

In 2001 Rehberger was appointed to the faculty of Frankfurt's Städelschule, the most influential art school in the world for the past 20 years, if not longer. Along with friends and colleagues such as Rirkrit Tiravanija (b.1961) and Douglas Gordon (b.1966), Rehberger developed an approach to thinking about and creating art that involved intellectual, experiential and social collaboration, subsequently described as 'Relational Aesthetics' by curator Nicolas Bourriaud, co-director with Jérôme Sans of the Palais de Tokyo at the time of its opening in 2002. Though much disputed, the term has stuck.¹ The combination of a group of talented artists who were close friends, a leading teaching institution and the support of a major new public institution in the form of the Palais de Tokyo, along with the protean milieu of millennial Paris and Berlin, where so many of these artists lived, led to a transformation in how we think about art. Right in the vanguard was Tobias Rehberger.

Browsing images of Rehberger's work, from buzzing optical bars (*Cafeteria*, 2009) and twin ceramic modular kitchens (*Performance of two lonely objects that have a lot in common*, 2014-2017) to his pixelated wall-transfers and ribbon lamps, it is easy to infer how Rehberger's practice is informed by and exploits the intersections between art, design and architecture. Less obvious but equally important though is how people engage with the experience of his work, both physically and socially, including in its creation. Two of the best examples of this are exhibited at Galerie Urs Meile: the *Vase Portrait* and *Infection* series of works.

Portraits

Since 1997 Rehberger has been making portraits of his friends comprising a vase designed by him and flowers chosen by the subject. The vases involve a variety of media, sometimes mixed, including ceramics, plastic, glass, wood, metal and paper. Each vase represents particular aspects of the subject. At the Rockbund exhibition, there are portraits of artist friends such as Douglas Gordon, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jorge Pardo, and Sam Taylor-Wood. One vase looks like a giant cigarette stub, while another includes sheets of newspaper (working out the connections is part of the fun of them, though some remain stubbornly cryptic). For his Beijing show, Rehberger has portrayed a number of the gallery's artists: Cao Yu, Hu Qingyan, Wang Xingwei, Yang Mushi, Shao Fan, Not Vital, Xie Nanxing, Mirko Basaglia and Ju Ting. The artists represent different connections with Rehberger himself (artists whom he has got to know over the last 20 years, including when visiting China) but also wider artistic and art historical or systemic connections, such as geographic (Beijing, Basel, Berlin), generational, and linguistic (some artists have a common language (German or English), others not (Wang Xingwei speaks only Chinese)). All have shown internationally as part of the new art world economy and ecosystem, which includes both biennales like Venice and art fairs like Basel. Each vase is unique and has naturally its own specific individuality. But they are also just vases, objects to collect, to own, to display, or rather they are objects that superficially perform this function. The crowded room at Rockbund, with dozens of vases grouped on plinths, deliberately carrying connotations of both memorial and commercial, is insistently ambiguous.

Yet as anyone can attest who has visited Rockbund, the room is deliriously aromatic. The invisible perfume from the flowers is also both overwhelming and untouchable. It cannot be collected or owned, only experienced or recalled. This is the other key aspect of the *Vase Portrait* series. Rehberger provides the basis for each portrait – the vase – but the subject, whether artist or friend, must complete/complement the portrait by adding the flowers which represent both the subject and their relationship with the artist, whether roses, violets or strelitzia. Of course, they are ephemeral, as are people and their relationships. History is always a matter of becoming, of reinterpretation: a practice of retelling stories and recounting characters and their relationships to one another and different events, sometimes truly, sometimes falsely, intentionally or not. This is not mere relativism though, just a matter of perspective, because the *Vase Portrait* series demands we pay attention. As Rehberger knows, ‘real’ experience requires discipline and sincerity (but also laughter). If you want to understand, you have to commit to engage, but even then maybe you’ll *still* get it wrong.

Infections

Rehberger’s *Infection* series began in 2002. Each sculpture comprises a swirling, curling arrangement of strips of brightly colored Velcro tapes that hang from the ceiling supported by lighting cords powering light bulbs. Each *Infection* is first composed by other people, such as Rehberger’s students or studio assistants. It is a type of game. Rehberger then intervenes in the works, adjusting, tweaking, moving, but the rule is that he is not allowed to add any material: he has to use what is given to him. The practice echoes the Surrealist game of Exquisite Cadaver, in which pictures of bodies are collectively drawn on the basis that each successive participant can only just see the edges of their predecessor’s contribution. Rehberger’s variation on this theme particularly questions notions of (his) authorship but also emphasizes the influence of chance. For Rehberger, art exists as much in the engagement with its makers and viewers and the conversations that it generates rather than its objecthood, of the thing displayed itself. This is reinforced by the title *Infection* and the nature of the materials from which they are composed. The colored two-dimensional strips exist in three-dimensional space; as three-dimensional drawings. They are artworks too but also just lamps. They are fragile, delicate and not completely stable. A light breeze can make a lamp turn like a mobile. Each element – Velcro strips, cable and a lightbulb and socket – and the force of gravity alone contributes to how the composition as a whole hangs, how it is presented, along with the collective decisions that led to its ultimate form and how it should be displayed. The *Infections* are both self-sufficient and a product of collective effort, and slowly they are infiltrating more and more spaces and places.

The final essential part of the exhibition are the wall works, comprising huge floor-to-ceiling pixelated images. To the naked eye the images are largely indistinct or at best ambiguous but seen through a mobile phone viewfinder, reveal their hidden subject. At the Beyeler Foundation and Art Basel Miami Beach in 2015, the images were pornographic, giving a frisson or shock to unwitting admirers who wanted to make a keepsake record of seemingly innocuous abstract design. At these locations and at Rockbund, the pixilation extended to boxy benches, pedestals and planters, more than hinting that pixilation is also a virulent infection.

Every aspect of Rehberger’s work is informed by the concupiscence in how we experience art, and more generally in how we engage with images and truth in the post-Internet universe. Art is not a thing but a function of how it is created and experienced. It relies on social exchanges and accidents, slippages and misinterpretations, at once charming and perverse, public and private. It can be trusted but perhaps shouldn’t be, which makes the questions it asks, posed in search engines and observed through viewfinders, more vital, the more seductive and infectious it becomes.

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¹ For more on ‘Relational Aesthetics’, the key text is Claire Bishop’s critique of the concept in *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* in OCTOBER 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79.

Tobias Rehberger (*1966 in Esslingen, Germany) lives and works in Frankfurt am Main, Germany and has been a professor of Fine Arts at the Frankfurt Städelschule since 2001. Selected solo exhibitions and projects include *If you don't use your eyes to see, you will use them to cry*, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2019); *Yourself is sometimes a place to call your own*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Busan, South Korea (2018); *24 Stops*, Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland (2016); *Home and Away and Outside*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany (2014); *Tobias Rehberger: Wrap it up*, MACRO Museum, Rome, Italy (2014); *Dazzle Ship London*, River Thames, London, United Kingdom (2012); *When I See the Other Side of Heaven, It Is Just as Blue* (commission), The Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2012); *Nest* (commission), Bloomberg SPACE, London, United Kingdom (2012); *Tobias Rehberger*, MAXXI, Rome, Italy (2010); *The Chicken-and-Egg-No-Problem Wall-Painting*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2008); *On Otto*, Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy (2007); *Get a New Liver*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom (2006); *Private Matters*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, United Kingdom (2004); *Night Shift*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France (2002) and *The Sun from Above*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA (2000). Rehberger was awarded a Golden Lion as best artist at the 2009 Biennale di Venezia.

Christopher Moore is an art historian, critic and cofounder of Ran Dian art magazine, where he held the position of publisher from 2010 to 2018. He then joined NRM, a new curatorial consultancy. Moore continues to contribute to Ran Dian and he is the editor of a monograph on Xu Zhen, published by Distanz in 2014.