

Not afraid of a fridge

memory aid to three parts of
"I Can't Live In A Living Room"

Text by Natalie Keppler

The view into the freezer Thomas Swinkels used over the course of all three parts of his presentation is laid bare open, the doors are detached. Acrylic shields cover the front instead, protecting the object inside. Carefully placed in the space upstairs from the tower annex, the freezer becomes a window into the body of the (now half) painted White Cube itself. The freezer acts as a metaphor for a bodily presence, in this way encompassing the theme that spans across the whole exhibition.

The three parts show a working process of getting to know the space while still being connected to the outside. It is an attempt to appropriate and to anatomize the body of the space at the same time.

Act 1

One freezer presents its internal veins and arteries: clean white thin tubes and a two drill cores, one standing next to the freezer in a corner of the room. The two stone cylinders are the negative spaces of the inner part of an architectural left over. What don't we see under the polished surface of a turned over trash bin? Turning the inside out: the exhibition is based on a series of inversions and infiltrations.

In blocking and opening up sights, Swinkels plays with different qualities of perception and materialities as well as our imagination of order of objects. Contradictions of clean sharp edges and rough cuts; shiny surfaces and soft textile; plastic tubes and spiderwebs. Plugged to a car battery and a transformer, the display of a smartphone shows a (moving ?) image of a ... waterfall?

With the digitally transmitted image, our perception of things is changing rapidly: "(...) our imagination now resembles the interfaces of the devices we use, (...). Extensive amounts of knowledge processing and memory are exported to electronic devices, and rapidly progressing miniaturization presents the prospect that these 'smart' devices will no longer be external to our bodies."

– Lou Cantor "Turning Inward" 2015

Act 2

Scene: (Memories are caught between walls, archived in spiderwebs, morbidly stripped down. And a fallen head holding up an ancient culture and ideas. Places inscribed with memories and pervaded by the objects / lives that had been therein before. Two photographs that seem to be similar at first sight are attached to the doors of two freezers. One is hanging on the pillar and the other is leaning against the second pillar of the space.)

Arranged in a way as a mise en abyme, the two image carriers become prostheses for a wounded architecture. The freezer upstairs, now switched on, functions as a modern memento mori. The steamy acrylic shield blurs the view and you cannot clearly see what is depicted on the rolled photograph inside. It appears as though we are on the inside and outside of something at the same time ... the body ... the domestic interior genre picture or in the middle of a drama? *The fourth wall is torn off, skinned:*

“HONEY: (Apologetically, holding up her brandy bottle) I peel labels.

GEORGE: We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs (An aside to NICK) them which is still slosh able – (Back to HONEY) and get down to bone...you know what you do then?

HONEY: (Terribly interested) No!

GEORGE: When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone...the marrow...and that's what you gotta get at. (A strange smile at MARTHA)”

- Edward Albee “Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?” 1962

Act 3

How to get access to the inner self? The only way to end the miserable play-within-the-play is to be honest to the bone as Edward Albee metaphorically shows in the third act of his theater play "Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?".

The red light is seeping through, underneath the newly built-in entrance door to the third part of the exhibition series. Playing with an entrance situation "L'Entrée de L'Exposition" was also the purpose of Marcel Broodthaers in 1979, who wanted to ironically ask how an artist can enter the canon of art history with a retrospective. Instead of looking back only to repeat, he wanted to develop new contexts and models of objects.

Once entered, the room, closed in on itself, appears as a time capsule or contemporary grotto. A slightly uncanny feeling is provoked by the shadow on the wall that looks like a skull. It is a chemically washed-out animal knee bone, mirrored by the sitting figure depicted by the photo on the wall. If you bend down and take a closer look, you realize that there is an endoscopic camera, filming the microcosmos of the bone, which is in turn displayed on a smartphone that has been attached to the back wall; the live image melting together with the space.

The physical involvement of the body is most present in this last part. Climbing the corkscrew stairs and being confronted with a blown-up low-resolution image of a hole, one becomes sensually aware of this penetrated space. The mise en abyme setting correlates with its literally meaning "placed into abyss" even more.

The picture was taken from the first camera view inside the wall and looking back down again, the dramaturgy of the three exhibitions revives in one's mind. With the traces and references to the former presentations, the freezers are closing themselves off again by turning their backs to us, keeping a temporary history inside.

In three acts Thomas Swinkels worked himself through different emotional aggregates and physical conditions of space.

What remains, will be the bench outside on the overgrown property facing the canal; a temporary spot for somebody who doesn't have a room of one's own.

A Conversation

Noor Mertens

Translated by Daniel Vorthuys

Noor: How did you go about contemplating this specific exhibition space at P/////AKT?

Thomas: In 2016 I had a duo-show in the same space. I was quite bummed out by the way it had looked. I felt that the space had dictated the exhibition too much. The first thing I thought on receiving this invitation from P/////AKT was: 'I want to breathe, make space'. Firstly, I wanted to paint the exhibition space white, a little bit like the initiation ritual some people do before moving in somewhere new. Besides this I just wanted to begin, without a master plan, because I don't work in such a manner. I wanted to see whether something would grow while working there.

I haven't approached these three current shows as a series. This was exciting, because the presentations followed each other quickly; I hadn't more than about one and a half months to think of something new. In between the presentations there would only be two weeks of building-up time. There was a chance of losing bearing, falling silent. In the end the space became one work, and the three presentations functioned as one gesture in three acts.

It is a simple fact: wrestling with such a space, the question of what such a space can be. What remains to be discovered? That was a motive that allowed me to delve deeper inside.

In the first instance I was inclined to direct my efforts towards the vacant lot adjacent to P/////AKT. I didn't want to use the interior space, at least not for the first show. Except that the thing I had in mind didn't work the way I wanted it to. I appeared to evade the interior – the cupboard under the stairs – as one must know – is a tricky area. In spite of this, I entered the exhibition space and didn't leave.

Although my previous plans for the vacant lot were in vain, I did make use of the exterior space. When the first show had already run for a few weeks, I placed a bench there (visible on the invitation of the final presentation). Barely anyone knew of it. Sometimes I took people there in order to drink beers, or while I was installing, to have my lunch there. Other than this I did not mention it. I was satisfied by its mere presence, albeit for the few people who knew about it.

I left it there for the duration of the entire exhibition period. Some vagabonds discovered it and used it for drinking beers – something I appreciated very much. I'd like to leave it for those who stumble into it accidentally, although I have yet to inquire whether this is possible with the landowner.

Besides this, I also drilled a hole through the wall facing the vacant lot, in doing so creating a literal connection to the place. I hung up blue lights that cast decorative shadows upon the laminated

boards at the side of the building every Friday evening. The cable went straight through the wall inside, which doesn't make any sense. This way, the light on the outside was dependent on the electricity network inside. During the first show I used a small camera, which I'd placed beneath a pebble outside, in order to film the vacant lot. Conversely this camera was independent of the interior, because it was battery-charged, even though the image of the camera was visible from inside. I liked the interplay between the two spaces.

I can't live in a living room is the title of the entire sequence of exhibitions. It's a funny paradox that I've begun to feel entirely at home in the space.

N: How did you take on the presentations in the so-called 'interior space'?

T: For the first show I had taken with me a few unrelated works that I'd made in my studio before. These functioned as a kind of footing for myself. From then on I felt more at ease while arranging the exhibition.

Eventually the works, that were quite capable of carrying their own weight, began to develop a strong relation to the space, even though I had not intended for them to. In the work *Contemplating the Dirt* that consists of the inside of a bin with a polished lid, the stairs in the exhibition space were reflected. I realized this object improved in strength by being placed in this context. This is precisely something

I get frustrated about: a work that I have made in my studio is sometimes too sacrosanct to ensue a relationship with anything else. This was entirely the case with the so-called freezer-work. At P/////AKT I ended up placing this work against the wall, but that was not the initial intention. I had to get over it, the fact that the work was behaving in an alternative manner.

N: Did you discover then that your works could be flexible?

T: Yes, the way in which I work, namely the process that takes place before the artwork, how I assemble materials and go about the context; a flexible approach towards the way I deal with the object itself is better suited. That artworks can be something at one designated moment in time, but that there is always – and I do not mean to be matter-of-fact – the possibility that they might start behaving differently.

As a result of the swift rate at which the presentations proceeded each other, I developed more agility with which to actually work in P/////AKT's exhibition space and came to be able to rely on it. If the periods in between presentations had been any longer, the entirety might have become more contrived.

The freedom I got from this experience to be more flexible with my work is an acquisition. As a result of that flexibility, the exhibition sequence became in itself something else: there existed a great connectivity, something I had not anticipated, which made the

series function as three consecutive acts.

Usually an exhibition feels like an endpoint: a process has taken place beforehand, and 'tada', this is the result. Now it was more process-based, with every presentation a momentary record of the proceedings. It was especially important for me the way I moved through the space and what the outcome was each time with the visual elements I took along with me. During the last show I was hoping the exhibition would become a sort of interior-space. As if I could communicate the vibe I was in while working there, a feeling bordering on the physical, that was almost erotic – drilling holes, dismantling things, bumping into things with your own body – to be visualized, and revealed a bit.

The process in P/////AKT was much more bare than the work period and exhibition I'd had a short while before in Los Angeles. I worked during this period with the history of a specific place, which came to function for me something like an umbrella. I thought it was pleasant to be, so to speak, trained into the environment. At P/////AKT I had tried leaning on the specific moments that presented themselves without that same umbrella. This publication can then also be conceived of as a work, in the sense that it offers variegated insight into the various stages and how the space and the various objects are altered. As a result it gains in worth. At this stage, right after the consecutive presentations, the time for reflection really starts.

N: What did you do in Los Angeles?

T: I went there for two months, between December 2015 and January 2016, with the artist Bas van den Hurk, whom I have assisted before. We knew that we would end our time there by doing a duo-show. I was intending to visit some goldmines. In the end I looked up Llano del Rio, a commune dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. This was founded by Job Harriman, just after he'd unsuccessfully tried to become the mayor of Los Angeles. Those who joined Harriman's ranks had another, non-capitalist idea about the world. The commune fell into disarray not so long afterwards.

There are all kinds of remains to be found of this special place, currently situated beside the highway: houses, ovens, a local shoe-factory etc. The people also published their own magazine, The Western Comrade, that is still available online on marxists.org.

I made moulds of the ruins while I was there. Besides this I also made work during the residency in which I combined microwaves with images belonging to the covers of the aforementioned magazine. It was for me the first time that I worked with what I call 'onderbeelden' [literal translation: underimage, underfigure] by which I mean something that signifies the site of origin of the work as well as the exhibition-space itself. The piece functions as its own territory in which the work takes place, but exists simultaneously as a thing in the space. You can look 'at' it while looking 'within' it.

During the residency I made many expeditions through the city, often together with Bas. There's an incredible amount of homeless

people in Los Angeles. Their camps growing forth beside the highway, as some kind of counter-architecture. The negative space of the city is getting populated, here takes place the genuine city-growth. It was harrowing as much as it was fascinating.

N: Why are you interested in that commune?

T: I am always looking for the periphery of something. At P/////AKT that can be a wall in between the exhibition space and the vacant lot. In Los Angeles it was the commune. It's an entirely forgotten place that is in stark contrast with the city of Los Angeles itself. It worked out in such a way that the founder wasn't to become mayor of Los Angeles, though if he had things would have been considerably different. The commune itself had the potential to be anything. In a few years time the last stones will be gone, the commune is slowly dissolving. I enjoy connecting myself to such a place, going there, and allowing some aspect of it to return in my own work; I was mostly interested by the context itself, not until later did any work actually emerge from it.

I still ask myself how you can transcend such an historical place as an artist. How do you take the character or power of such a context without solely documenting it? This is what I was looking for. I did not want it to become an anecdote. I think it's very important in such matters to visit some place physically.

N: Why is the physical aspect, being there, so important?

T: That has to do with an involvement with the world, really being there and the hope that gives of charging your own work. The moulds I made, for instance, have really encased certain stones. Besides this I also think it's important to make the effort to go somewhere and show engagement, whether dealing with politically loaded subjects or simply depicting a landscape. Otherwise it can be a bit gratuitous to make use of such a source.

N: And why is it important for you that physical objects come into being as result of such a physical visit?

T: Because in the end they become the image. I could have for instance started filming, but I didn't want to. I believe in the transmutability of sculpture. I operate from that understanding, and it is an important aspect of my work. Within every expedition I look for a way to converge the energy that I find into material.

N: Is recognition important within your work? Do you stop 'abstracting' a known object at a moment when it is still recognizable?

T: The question is where I abstract it towards. I find it interesting that a work can sit very closely to what it originally was, while in fact

it lends the character of the original object in order to say something quite different. If it actually becomes something else, the tension disappears. My work bears a parasitic relationship to what it initially was. The freezer work is both a freezer and something else, but it derives its power from being a freezer, and the way it conserves things.

I believe in a direct relationship with objects or places, such as with the field trip to the commune. I also encountered that relationship in the way that I furnished the series of exhibitions at P/////AKT, for instance in the way I place such a freezer work against the wall.

N: The creative process affects the outcome but is still something different?

T: Yes, absolutely, but in these three exhibitions they move closer together. The removal of a wall is in one sense preparation for an exhibition, but is ultimately also the work itself. Nothing remains of the removal itself, there's a certain rigidity or rigor therein, one which I more often detect in myself. I doubted at first whether I should leave the scraps of wood on the floor, but then it becomes a very different work, namely an act that you witness as spectator. In the final situation you come to see the building in a different way, and that is what I wanted.

N: You had over a month to prepare for the second exhibition after

the first one in P/////AKT. How did you come to determine your strategy?

T: For the second, I was actually very excited about the way the small camera would work. It filmed in real-time, sometimes a woodlouse would walk past. The quality of the picture developed something corporeal, similar to a camera-recording of an internal investigation of the body.

At first I wanted with this camera to photograph all the holes in the exhibition space. These I would enlarge and hang in the space, as a radical approach to creating an installation. Eventually I realized that I did not want this at all. I should not show what's inside the walls by means of an image, but should take out the wall itself.

N: How do you see the relation between the three exhibition-sequences? Is there any kind of narrative present or cause and effect?

T: Yes it is indeed a kind of cause and effect. I think it's nice that a strange logic came into existence inside the space, containing elements that I had brought in during my first show. Certain images travelled along through all three shows. In this manner I tried to create a personal, small history.

I was also responsible for the textual accompaniment. During the second exhibition I used a quote that is a nice metaphor for the way

I worked in P/////AKT. I did not disclose the source of the quotation, because it was not relevant for the exhibition:.

“HONEY: (Apologetically, holding up her brandy bottle) I peel labels.

GEORGE: We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs (An aside to NICK) them which is still sloshable--(Back to HONEY) and get down to bone...you know what you do then?

HONEY: (Terribly interested) No!

GEORGE: When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone...the marrow...and that's what you gotta get at. (A strange smile at MARTHA)”

Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

This quotation functioned as a footnote, or undertone for the presentation(s). As a result it led to my idea of filming bones from within the bone itself, what could be seen in the third presentation..

The quote, which is quite an aggressive one, to a certain degree signifies also what I had done to the space before the first exhibition took place. The act of demolishing the wall was also entirely an aggressive one. By continuously using the quote in a different context, I could transform it in order to allow it to move along with the various presentations.

N: Does the quote add something that would otherwise have been lost?

T: It symbolizes my whole attitude towards that place, something that is indeed not directly visible. Working in the space was very physical, it was a big mess during the building-up, and once you're done it's no longer visible, which I don't want it to be, yet it is important that it took place.

I often come to think: 'shit, how tidy everything looks'. While I believe the purity of the work to be important, because then an object can say something, it's more abstract.

N: Would you describe the presentations at Pakt as installations or as exhibitions?

T: Installation is a tricky word, to me it has such an opaque meaning. For me an installation stands for a construction in a place that is not occupied with having a specific context, but rather with how objects relate to each other amongst themselves. In the past I've called my presentations constellations, because it involves more variegated, independent things that influence each other. Within the three consecutive presentations at P/////AKT working and exhibiting were converged slightly, which made the moment of exhibition less definitive, there being no question of a finished whole. I refer to it as an exhibition, but the word 'moment' conveys it even better.