

Curatorial statement

This exhibition unites five artists to investigate the theme of the dead artist, of his self-representation - or substitute - of the disquieting strangeness of a living artist forecasting himself into death: the artist and his effigy flirting with the idea of his own mythology, from his self-destruction to his resurrection. Here the decorum, the ceremonial, from the funeral bed to the reliquary, could echo the two sides of the City of Angels, glamorous and obscure at the same time. LA, this gigantic factory of hysterical and cinematographic illusions that unveil a morbid temptation and recurrent attraction for apocalyptic and end of the world prophecies that reside under the Hollywood star glitter and the smooth kitsch of an invasive hyper pop imagery. The LA of James Ellroy and of Bret Easton Ellis, cynical and paranoid, doomed to depression and annihilation. The LA open to all sorts of occult, satanic and conspiracy downfalls that echo the totally devastating experiences of the seventies when Bowie saw LA as the hell where "you drive like a demon from station to station". Even though the Christian New Age ego trip seems today to be more watered down and insignificant in this falsely true world of stars of Kardashian-like reality shows. The famous *La La Land*, LA as an immense fabric of illusions where the A-list and the most grotesque gurus exacerbate all sorts of downfalls and fantasies, from the purest esotericism to religious syncretism. The land that is closest to the angels is also that of sacrificial temptations (*American Psycho*, *Ken Park*, *Bling Ring*)¹, of the ultra kitsch Catholic baroque of Chicano culture (*Echo Park LA*)², up to the joyful and liberating Bacchanalias of Paul McCarthy, the darker and more critical visions of Mike Kelley, the more Christ-like and enchanted ones of Jeffrey Vallance or the more pop and dreamlike visions of Jim Shaw.

The artists summoned as beacons of the theme surrounding this exhibition are mainly Paul Thek and Mike Kelley. Paul Thek for the representation of his own dead body in one of his major works *The Tomb* (1967) and Mike Kelley, who commented upon this same work in a cutting-edge and very instructive text entitled, "Death and Transfiguration. A letter from America" in *Paul Thek*³. Kelley evokes the sixties when American art wasn't as smooth as the pop aesthetics of Warhol would have liked to make believe, but where the figure of the dead hippie denounced an America that showed "it's fear of death, the erotic, gender confusion and visual opulence..."³, and where the self-representation of the artist as deceased was according to Kelley like a final gesture of resistance and the resurrection of its freedom once assassinated by the dominant culture: "The dead hippie is a status of creative resistance murdered"³.

Paul Thek and other artists in Europe such as the Viennese actionists of the 1960s dramatized the representation of the divided, decomposed and raw body, as a provocation through the flesh, the return of the real, the dead against Western society and its good taste, its conventions and violence. We can observe the same use of the body and flesh among more contemporary artists such as Jeffrey Vallance and Liz Craft who are invited for this exhibition.

¹*American Psycho*, novel by Bret Easton Ellis, 1992 and film by Mary Harron, 2000, *Ken Park*, film by Larry Clark and Ed Lachman, 2002, *Bling Ring*, film by Sofia Coppola, 2013

²*Echo Park, LA*, film by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2006

³Mike Kelley, « Death and Transfiguration. A letter from America » in *Paul Thek*, Castello di Rivara, Turin, 1992

The Christ-like figure of the hippie and its displayed body crosses in the work of Paul Thek notions of sacred and profane and recalls his vision of the artist as a suffering being. He admits during an interview given to Harald Szeemann in 1973⁴ that the artist creates his mythologies and that art itself is a liturgy. As for Jeffrey Vallance, he also constructs, in a more tender and ironic ceremonial version, a religious iconography that mixes Christian aesthetics with more Californian New Age libertarian equipment. *Blinky*, Vallance's favourite and recurrent subject, the dead and "defrozen" chicken lying in his delicately ornamented coffin with satin, constructs a tragicomic, incongruous and irreverent sketch that offers, like his relics, ritualised, folkloric and childish objects, a fairy-tale world, freed of guilt, open to acts of faith, to a dialogue with the afterlife and to mysteries and maybe even to divine revelations.

Liz Craft's "princess", a kind of sleeping Ophelia spread out on her couch, or her deathbed - *Nicole couch (Pink, Fuschia, Orange)*, 2010 - could be the feminine version of the figure of the *The Tomb*. We find the same usage of the colour pink, that of hippies and of the flesh, as well as of Vallance's *Blinky*, this mushy, sentimental and popular colour of bad taste. The rose is "the fairydust colour,[...], the hermaphrodite colour"⁵, as are the colours orange and violet, asexual and associated rather with spirituality. The choice of the colour rose in the works of Craft and Vallance through a kind of *Arts and Crafts* process, often carried out in fiberglass, allows to make identical replications of bodies displayed in mortuary ceremonies, but which are totally fake, baroque and almost repellent by their smoothness, imitating the most popular objects of worship whilst completely reinventing their own ceremonials and rituals of death. For Vallance, his reliquary works mix appropriationist gestures with a very personal and intimate collection. Vallance himself says of his reliquary project: "I intend no sacrilege toward relics; I am using the convention of reliquaries as a conceptual framing device to produce a kind of autobiography rendered in personal artefacts. My process of relic accumulation is a lifelong project, with some relics generated intentionally and some accidentally, and it will continue long after the end of this specific project."⁶

As for the universe of Craft, her so sweet aesthetics and her tacky sensuality that are at the crossroads of American *low culture* and the more refined aesthetics of the Symbolists or of the Jugendstil, they exalt through an overdose of prettiness and cupcake-like flesh a bitterer and angrier counter-attack. Following the example of Thek's "meat pieces" and *Technological Reliquaries* that pushed to the point of revulsion visions of the decomposing body, mirroring the American society's own violence, inhumanity, intolerance and deliquescence, Craft proposes a feminine, ultra-sexual and extroverted feminism without complex, represented by a new kind of hippie that more furious and post-punk than *peace and love*.

Although Kelley in 1992 denounced with clear-sightedness, sarcasm and concern that Disney was the God of America: "Disney is the sweetness-and-light shielding the dark cloud. Disney is our God"⁷, it is difficult to imagine today a Manichaeian vision and a clearly critical stance, where recognisable and defined worlds would confront. The threat may indeed be more global, diffuse, not easily identifiable, predicting a darker and more troubling nebula than the one that Kelley could have imagined in 1992. Wouldn't the less political responses reside in the research, the representation and fascination for theories that are closer to esotericism, prophecies, and the rediscovery of beliefs in more occult forces, shamanism, and forgotten sects, mixing post-New-

⁴Harald Szeeman, « Interview with Paul Thek, Duisburg, December 12, 1973 » in *Paul Thek, Artist's Artist*, edited by Harald Falckenberg and Peter Weibel, ZKM/Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe and Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg, 2008.

⁵ Mike Kelley, « Death and Transfiguration. A letter from America » in *Paul Thek*, Castello di Rivara, Turin, 1992

⁶ From the press release of the exhibition, *The Word of God: Jeffrey Vallance*, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, December 2011 - February 2012.

⁷ Mike Kelley, « Death and Transfiguration. A letter from America » in *Paul Thek*, Castello di Rivara, Turin, 1992

Age ideology with retro-futuristic visions or anticipatory post-apocalyptic theses? In his imaginary museum (*In the Museum 1* and *2*, videos, 2011-2012 and 2012-2013), Mathis Gasser places the doppelgänger puppet of Christopher Walken, Hollywood star and phantom-like actor with a troubling gaze, into an immaculate exhibition space where he is then attacked by artworks and protected by zombies. For Gasser, these phantoms that occupy the museum would represent the collective subconscious that influence behind the scenes our society crossed by new expressions of violence, the resurgence of primal and irrational fears that disrupt its organisation and its mythologies and exalt its dark and deadly side. Gasser probably owes a lot to the fictional and multi-referenced world of Jim Shaw who in his invented universe of *Oism* (*The Whole: A Study in Oist Integrated Movement*, video, 2009), a real-false religion based on an ancient sect, mixes doctrines oscillating between Evangelists, Mormons and freemasons that he nurtures freely through a heterogeneous set of references and rituals. The ballet *The Whole* is a possible evocation of the liberated and natural rhythmic of Isadora Duncan and the luminous symbolism of William Blake, a dance as a prayer or a communion that is probably more vintage and pop than spiritual.

In the same vein of symbolic research, Fabian Marti, in a new series, flirts with occult sciences and divinatory arts through the reinterpretation of the hanged man of the Tarot, *Hanged Man* (*Christopher*), 2016. A hanging figure carried out in a single line and with the transparency of the synthetic materials that makes the imaginary organs and blood flow transpire. This fluidity of this shape recalls *Art Nouveau* aesthetics and the transparency of the objects of Émile Gallé, a period that was also versed in esotericism, magic and was carried by a vision of the world that was at the same time naturalist and fictitious.

Text : Véronique Bacchetta, Geneva, July 2016

Translation : Zsuzsanna Szabo