Josef Strau
The Balalaika Moment

(1) In the movie "Dr. Zhivago," the balalaika plays its famous melody again and again, but it also appears as a real instrument a few times, and if I remember correctly, that happens actually only in the beginning and in the end. I used to say that watching this movie I usually start crying for the first time before the titles start, which is just after the balalaika makes its first appearance and then I cry for the last time when the balalaika finally reappears in the very last scene of the film. I am not sure if my tears would still work that way, generally I hope I could be more critical about it. The balalaika melody comes in either whenever love is going to happen, or more logically to the idea of the film, when Dr. Zhivago sits down again to write new poetry. The real instrument instead comes in whenever a new poet is born, or more accurately, whenever the poet is born in someone, or as in the film, whenever the instrument appears in his life and is given to him or her in an almost coincidental way, but is then going to stay with him or her and will keep influencing their lives in the future in good or bad ways, in order to make them write their poetry. Typically these sort of balalaikas make people create great wealth and develop happiness and sometimes they keep them suffering uselessly as wrong influences during early life can do to you for the rest of it; it is the kind of instrument which is beyond them, which actually plays them, not the other way around and makes them suffer quite enough sometimes too. (2) During the time before the work for an exhibition is ready there is a certain time before making decisions, a time of sometimes-great happiness and real artistic density. Almost every time I have undergone this special period of the productive process, I start dreaming about finally making an exhibition without any material concerns, even without material objects, an exhibition just reduced to text without material objects actually. But always the objects, like lamps, would start walking into my kitchen, my studio or the gallery space and then they would stay with the texts and even push the text back and turn them into the background of my work, somehow liberating the texts from the stressful role of being the forefront objects, allowing them to float around independently and unconcerned with the rules of commodities. Whenever I feel the desire to make a pure, simple, text-only exhibition, I remember a special moment as young artist, a kind of balalaika moment. I was working for some months as an assistant for Isa Genzken then. One day she asked if I would be able to paint a text by Lawrence Weiner onto the wall of her studio. As a rule, I would have as always, proudly said "yes, sure I can, but I must warn you, it may take me quite a long time," but for this job I could truly proudly tell her that I had done the Lawrence Weiner job already for some galleries and asked her if I should do it with the typical Lawrence Weiner typeface. So she explained that in fact it does not have to be made in the certain typeface and that she bought the sentence and the deal included the freedom to use and apply the purchased sentence in whatever way she wants to. Anyways, she walked out of the room to find the sentence and when she came back with it, she opened her hand in front of me and I saw in her hand a small piece of rumpled paper which was his work and the words and the lines of words were written on it. I was deeply impressed as a young artist in the middle of the eighties by the incredible magic power of an artist making a healthy amount of money that way, without having gone through the process of making huge material efforts, without forming a so-called object of desire or a work of idolatry in order to sell. I loved this very uncommon way to look at a piece of art, or at some piece of text, as I looked at the just opened hand, more similar to presenting a gift of gold. But, of course, I was still not aware of the incredible magic influence this act of exchange from then on would have on me, not aware of the spell that was put on me, when Isa Genzken opened her hand to allow me to look at the work, that anytime I would go through the process of determining the objects of my next exhibition many years later, I would remember it. It was a real balalaika moment. This moment would reappear again and again like the call of a hidden voice, persuading me to make it in a similar way. But then, before I can decide, as I said, some other objects would be attracted by it too and they would come in and come into the exhibition, but now, still weeks before the exhibition, I still don't know them and don't want to know during these moments of preparation and pure undecided happiness.
How should I now tell? (3) Strau, Josef, "7lampmemoirs," poster and lamp theatre text in the shanghai library, 2010 (4) Strau Josef, "Why working together with an inner Voice" May Magazin Nr.4, Paris p.131-137 (5) Strau, Josef, "The Why does this all happen to me Experience" poster, "The Diary of the Painter" at "House of Gaga", Mexico 2010

opening
saturday 11.12.2010
19:00 - 21:00

exhibition until 29.01.2011
wednesday - friday 14:00 - 18:00
saturday 12:00 - 18:00

dépendance
varkensmarkt 4 rue du marché aux porcs | brussel 1000 bruxelles
tel. .32 .2 217 74 00 | fax .32 .2 217 74 01
dependance@skynet.be | www.dependance.be