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Josef Strau, "Top Ten", in Artforum, September 2008, p. 183 - 184

Josef Strau

Josef Strau is a Berlin-based artist whose work is currently included in Manifesta 7. His solo exhibition at the Malmö Konsthall in Sweden opens this month.

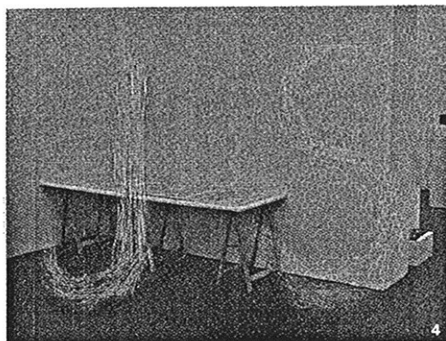
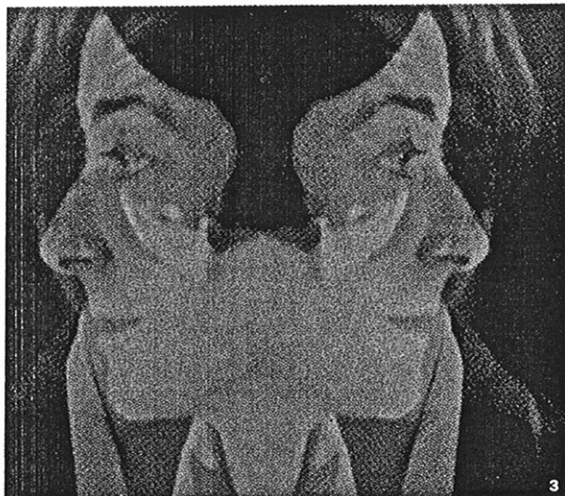


1 CHRIS KRAUS, *TORPOR* (SEMIOTEXT[E], 2006) More intense than any of the recent literary attempts to portray Europe's dark, post-1989 narrative of traditionalism and neoconservatism, *Torpor* is probably *the* book to deal with the past's haunting of the political present. While telling the story of an artist's becoming a writer, the novel suggests that the desire for a social identity is, for some, still entwined with a fundamental understanding of the impossibility of one's ever really having a home—giving us the tiniest sense of hope.

2 MARK VON SCHLEGELL, *VENUSIA* (SEMIOTEXT[E], 2005) Mark von Schlegell's first novel, *Venusia*, seems the result of a long and complicated reflection on experience by an author seeking a return to unencumbered romanticism in literature. Choosing the genre of science fiction to synthesize such contemporary interests would seem unlikely. But *Venus*, the book's setting, is, after all, one of the planets closer to Earth. And though the off-world-colony location might suggest the writer's desire to escape the dilemmas and pressures of literary production today, *Venusia* in fact possesses all the qualities of great fiction.

3 SUSANNE M. WINTERLING, *EILEEN GRAY, THE JEWEL AND TROUBLED WATER*, 2008 Traditionally, organic architecture—termed such, clearly enough, for its dialogues between architectural functions and those of the human body—is dismissed as reactionary. But at the Berlin Biennial, Susanne M. Winterling's transformation of the Neue Nationalgalerie's two symmetrical coat-check rooms into a set of "lungs" had to be acknowledged as an excellent critical (and hysterical) intervention in a man-made environment. Her installation—undermining the tastefully bourgeois space, creating an almost manic sense of insecurity within modernist identity—was a dark site within the museum, but also something quite "alive."

4 BERNADETTE CORPORATION, "JOSEF STRAU," KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH PARALLEL, 2008 While eschewing its own claim to authorship, Bernadette Corporation still occasionally turns to author-driven projects, using a single, "external" subject to structure a given work. In this vein, the collective recently started a series of monographic shows in which real artists are "revealed" through the exhibitions' mediation. For "Josef Strau," works (mine) were used as source material, with, for instance, part of a prose poster I made projected onto a wall—the light's spatial beauty creating a new kind of textual image. Already known for producing great texts and making great references, in this series the group proves itself to be great at appropriation, creating a whole sensibility by following traces of meaning.



5 GRAND OPENINGS, CARRIER WAVES, (MUSEUM MODERNER KUNST STIFTUNG LUDWIG WIEN, 2008) Among artists “working within a group,” Grand Openings—whose core members are Ei Arakawa, Jutta Koether, Jay Sanders, Emily Sundblad, and Stefan Tcherepnin—follows the perfect recipe for pure, formalist conduct combined with narrative procedures. The MUMOK show was a cinematic spectacle, in which each individual made different things happen at the same time in the same place—all of it seemingly choreographed by one invisible, mathematical brain. In effect, the group produced a very abstract (quite empty, actually) space as *context*, providing a good alternative to the usual social noise that often makes it seem like there are few possibilities left for action in art.

6 CLEGG & GUTTMANN, MACH VS. BOLTZMANN (WIENER SECESSION, 2006) For their Wiener Secession installation in 2006, artists Clegg & Guttmann turned to the world of scientific theory in early-twentieth-century Vienna, focusing in particular on the physicists Ernst Mach and Ludwig Boltzmann’s debates on atomic structure. Two years later, the publication for the show—loaded with images and extensive essays in a Talmud-like layout—remains noteworthy. Produced for a limited audience, it recalls the spirit of science among intellectual circles in the heyday of Viennese modernism: a theory and exercise book for practical, all-but-forgotten experiments.

7 KEREN CYTTER, I WAS THE GOOD AND HE WAS THE BAD AND THE UGLY (REVOLVER, 2006) Probably all of Keren Cytter’s projects are driven by a certain narrative force, even while some critics say she blasts at the limits of artistic representation. In fact, the strange power of her work, whatever its formal modes, arises from a very consistent use of fiction. For instance, in the fearlessly titled *I was the good . . .*—originally a sequence of videos but then published in book form—she employs the description of a nonexistent film as the basis for a pressure-filled story of adolescent psychosis. Sometimes scary, the work is always beyond categorization.

8 MODZITZER HASIDIM, “MIZMOR L’DAVID” This group of Hasidic composers was organized around the idea that songs could actually invoke the spirit of social change. For example, “Mizmor l’David,” composed during World War I, addressed the spirit of the Jewish king of poets, calling attention to the plight of the homeless in the refugee city of Radom, Poland. Intriguingly, the Modzitzer Hasidim *love* the idea of appropriation, taking up European marches and Russian drinking songs in order to “bring the melodies out of exile.”

9 CLAUDE LANZMANN, POURQUOI ISRAEL, 1972 Claude Lanzmann’s first film, *Pourquoi Israel*, is now finally available on DVD, and it is as striking as ever. In the documentary, people begin by telling serious stories, but soon seem as though they are acting out their own parts—turning themselves into roles to be played, actually, and performing their various pasts. One man in Dimona, for instance, pretends to lament his having traveled to that stony, zero-comfort city, before adding that he would never trade places with his brother (who lives comfortably in Monte Carlo). Such moments make the film’s subject—the land of Israel—one of perpetual reinvention, an almost imaginary place. In Dimona, the documentary speaks of a city beyond the real city.

10 SUSAN STERN, THESE STRANGE GERMAN WAYS AND THE WHYS OF THE WAYS (ATLANTIC-BRÜCKE, 1997) A book intended for readers (mainly Americans) moving to or “doing business” in Germany, *These Strange German Ways* is the Federation of German Industry’s guide to cultural behavior. The volume is rather curious, however, describing, among other things, Germans’ obsessions with certain styles of tables, houses, and doors, in addition to their irrational “objectivism.” Strangely enough, there is also statistical material quantifying the degree to which people from other cultures do not care about such things. I once gave a copy to a friend. After reading it, he claimed that he could hardly speak with Germans anymore—let alone look them in the eyes! □