

GUILLAUME BIJL

"Compositions" and "Sorry-works"

Opening: March 8, 2024, 6 – 9pm

Exhibition: March 9 – Mai 18, 2024

Galerie Nagel Draxler, Cologne

PRESS RELEASE

Nagel Draxler presents a significant exhibition by Belgian artist Guillaume Bijl showing one of his first "Sorry-Works" from the late eighties, an emblematic Composition trouvée from 1992, and several new pieces seen here for the first time. Each work mirrors an episode in Bijls' ongoing scenic dialogue with the duperies of the consumer-sphinx. Deploying his characteristic "situational irony"[1] he sketches the "dream houses of the collective,"[2] dragging symbols of class and capital down to the thrift shop of ready-mades.

In a Sorry sculpture from 2018, two new-age humanoids with polished sheen sit next to poisonous toadstools and stare up at a rodent on a plinth, flanked by a hound. An installation of neon signage of the kind associated with kiosks and midnight shops, speaks out in haiku-like phrases, Nightshop Open Welcome/ Pool Aperto ATM/ Sale Tattoo Bar. In another work, customized doormats transform each home into a castle so the neo-gentry can sip Prosecco while wiping their feet on royal insignia. Bijl's bargain basement is a semiotic wonderland of archaeological still lifes that draw each of us into a world of fictional aspiration. In a moment of sheer tongue-in-cheek reversal, the gallery becomes a penny market filled with novelties and souvenirs, sitting ducks, pink flamingos, tribal art for tourists, and the kind of cheap décor that helps one to survive a night in a ubiquitous hotel room anywhere in the world.

Yet Bijl's compositions transcend the kitsch contexts from which they originate by holding back on any gush of emotion associated with cuteness, coziness, or an illusion of paradise. His translocations are highly retentive acts that reflect the rigorous conceptual space of the artist. They point to the "impersonality of a world market" and the tension produced between the "anemic remoteness" of fine art in a museum, and the "aesthetic hunger" of the mass consumer.[3] With temporal agility, Bijl drives these decoys of desire out of the cul-de-sac of tacky anachronism. He invites the viewer to poach across time frames and fields of referentiality, aiding and abetting this action with contextual disrespect. No found object is explained, and nothing is divulged about their original source. The taxonomic and lexicographic conventions of a museum display are disregarded. With these "chunks of reality," Bijl enters the memory of the homestead, and like an aesthetic bailiff, evaluates the signifiers that construct normative fantasies.[4] And when his semiotic analogies swerve too far off course, such that Bijl no longer recognizes the limits of his own realism, he apologizes. These are the Sorry-Works, promiscuous acts that produce a necessary diversion in the artist's own orthodoxy and put his "practical memory" to the test.[5]

Known for his remarkable Transformation Installations in which he recasts entire settings from a casino to a mattress store, chip shop, atomic shelter, or archeological dig, the works assembled here act like homeopathic concentrates of Bijl's larger oeuvre. They infuse expectations and produce a sensation of déjà-vu analogous to his Cultural Tourism Installations with their nostalgic, or pseudo-historical displays. In an early Composition trouvée (1992) with the banner "Foire du Tapis," Bijl displays a mannequin in a corset, stockings, bowler hat and red dicky tie, holding a SM-whip in her hand. At her feet, lie a chorus of torsos used to display suits in a tailor's shop. In a running gag, the black headless dummies toy with the white airbrushed stucco and busts of Nefertiti, Elvis, and Bonaparte from a nearby composition. Bilj's counter-mythical engineering scratches away at layers of faux authenticity. With dry wit, he invites us to find freedom in the riffs that lie latent within the everyday.

[1] John C. Welchman speaks of Bijl's "situational irony", which began in the late 1960s with lists of suggestions he made when visiting friends. See Welchman, *Jump of the Cat: Guillaume Bijl's Simulation Therapy*, jrp ringier, 2016.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Dream Houses of the Collective: Arcades, Winter Gardens, Panoramas, Factories, Wax Museums, Casinos, Railway Stations", in *The Arcades Project, 1927-40*, English translation, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 405.

[3] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Capricorn Books. To write a philosophy of art, according to Dewey, one must "re-establish the continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience which are works of art and the everyday events, actions and sufferings which are generally recognised as experience.", 1934, p. 3

[4] Bijl speaks of "chunks of reality, ranging from trivial consumption and inner fragments to pseudo-public manifestation decors." See his definition of "Composition trouvée" from 1991 in <https://www.guillaumebijl.be>.

[5] Benjamin, "Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all profane manifestations of nearness it is the most binding," *ibid.* p. 205.