

Ever/Repair

Isabel Lewis, Dirk Bell

22. 6. – 1. 9. 2024

Press talk: 21. 6. 2024, 10 am

Opening: 21. 6. 2024, 6 pm

HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark
Burgring 2, 8010 Graz (AT)

Total Romance: Partial Repair

Performance

5. 7. 2024, 6 pm

6. 7. 2024, 11 am – 5 pm

Curator:
Jan Tappe

How we perceive ourselves is deeply interwoven with our experience of interactions with others. Self-perception is always based on a reflection vis-à-vis another person. *Ever/Repair* is the collaboration of two artists who have found each other and mutually taken risks: over many years, Isabel Lewis and Dirk Bell have each individually created independent and unconventional bodies of work, which they now combine both as within their personal relationship and in their exhibition at HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark.

The title *Ever/Repair* plays with language insofar as it makes use of metaphors in order to approach new levels in terms of subject matter. Alongside the meaning of “*always/reparation*,” the title also refers to an onomatopoeitic conflation of the two words *every* and *pair*. The entanglement of the words is a symbol of the two individuals now intertwined as if in a ballroom dance.

The exhibitions at HALLE FÜR KUNST draws on a performance from 2022, for which Lewis and Bell worked together to develop the stage design. Ever since, they have collaborated on various occasions. In their joint practice, the artist couple is concerned with the creation of spaces enabling an all-encompassing sensual experience and an exchange between individuals. For this reason, and in particular reference to the works produced for this exhibition, they speak about *hosting*, and hosted situations or occasions. In this vein, *hosting* should not be understood as moralizing care, but in terms of the practices and policies of an empathetic care. Their work, while contingent, situational and adaptable to specific situations, always alludes to the European understanding of theater predominant since the era of the Baroque.

Inspired by the ornamentation and fanciful scenographies of baroque theater stages, Bell and Lewis have produced a series of painted, movable canvases. The scenery at HALLE FÜR KUNST consists of variable and modifiable racks, draped with fabrics, thereby constituting a setting with a series of room dividers; some (semi-)transparent, others opaque. Some of these have abstract forms, featuring gesturally sketchy fabric paintings, which portray figurative elements of birds or human bodies appearing out of nowhere.

In their research of the aesthetic techniques of the Baroque, Lewis and Bell explore their subversive potentials and limits, thereby revisiting the origins of European theater, which was concurrent with the emergence of new ideas surrounding representations of social and state order, such as the representation of power relations within a court. Simultaneously, thanks to the

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development of perspective within paintings, *coulisses*, i.e. theater settings, arose: flat pieces of scenery at the stage in a theater which, through illusionistic practices, transformed the angular stage into a place shrouded in myths. By shifting the arrangement of backdrops within their exhibition, Lewis and Bell deconstruct the traditional relief perspective and thereby the machinery of imagination in traditional set design. The suspension of a classic stage set is reinforced by the performance of four dancers, taking place in the exhibition over several hours on two days, leading to a blurring of boundaries between audience and performers.

Part of the exhibition is a soundscape made up of fragments of audio pieces by Bell, as well as literary texts selected by Lewis, which create an atmospheric auditive background in interaction with the performance and the audience. In particular, Lewis draws from a scene in Jamaican philosopher and writer Sylvia Wynter's play *Maskerade* (*1970). Wynter, who has taught at Stanford and is a pivotal voice of Central American post-colonial studies, is interested in examining knowledge and customs erased by colonialism or arisen as a result of hybridity. For *Maskerade*, Wynter explored the Jamaican performance tradition of *Junkanoo*—a festival that originated during the period of enslavement of the African population and their shipment to the European colonies of the Americas, and which is celebrated primarily in Jamaica, the Bahamas and Belize. This festivity draws on the many influences and contradictions within contemporary Jamaican society, in which indigenous customs, traditions handed down by former enslaved people and Christianization by colonial rulers all manifest. For Bell and Lewis, the custom of Junkanoo is paradigmatic of how identities are a result of hybridity.

By combining the original traditions of theater, dance and costume, carnivals are virtually predestined to reveal the structures underlying particular customs and making them visible. By means of this investigation and the reference to Wynter's play, the idea of *repair* referred to the exhibition's title, concurrently touches on themes of reparation. Through direct experience of sound and image, and based on the assumption that reparation can be experienced not only through vision and the gaze, but also haptically and through a multitude of senses, a performative, multi-sensory format, which ogles the baroque is created at HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark.

Trained in dance, literary criticism and philosophy, the work of Dominican-American choreographer and artist Isabel Lewis addresses drastic sensation and perception. According to Lewis, radical potential lies in time, in the exchange of physical experience and knowledge and in engaging intensively with oneself, others and the (built) environment. Her works unfold a dramaturgy responding to an evolving live situation and can be considered as audience-integrating formats of contemporary storytelling.

The artist Dirk Bell creates impressive works of highly technical and often, fantastical quality, merging elements as diverse as drawing, sculpture and installation. Ultimately, this always results in exhibition situations reminiscent of theater and its performativity.

The project at HALLE FÜR KUNST Steiermark can be understood as a consolidation of the perennial performance series *Give Rise To...* which actively and concretely scrutinizes the possibility of archiving performance(s). The exhibition is an attempt to make the work of Isabel Lewis and Dirk Bell tangible for a longer period, hence transforming its format.

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