

Office Magazine, Feb. 21, 2024, Vilda Krog

Currently at Kunsthalle Basel, You'll Find 'Everything No One Ever Wanted'



When denouncing Dada, Francis Picabia once wrote, "If you want to have clean ideas, change them like shirts." I have nothing to comment in regards to how often Tobias Spichtig changes his shirts, but the artist floats freely between mediums and ideas, embodying a sense of now, untethered from the Alexandrian arguments that cultural relevance is fleeting. His work engages with postcapitalist angst, challenging consumerism and fostering dialogues around the erosion of desire and the allure of mortality. Belonging to the realm akin to apocalyptic clickbait nihilism, alongside artists like Imhof, Elmgreen, and Dragset (consider their piece "Useless Bodies" 2022), Spichtig confronts tragedy without diluting its impact. His art captures the essence of our current moment but also offers a lens through which to navigate its complexities. It speaks volumes about our current condition, perhaps even more so than the daily newspaper (although I've yet to cancel my subscription).

Everything No One Ever Wanted, Spichtig's largest exhibition till date, doesn't grapple with the now; it formalizes it. Perhaps a now that no one ever wanted. A time where radical visual appearances are passé and the mod de jour lies in thematic newness, embraced by those, not necessarily capable, but willing to greet it. Institutionally approached, it acknowledges Baudrillard's ideas about simulacra and simulations, suggesting they may only scratch the surface of post-modernity.

Does this climate also reject appearance? Not entirely, but Spichtig's pieces aren't purely conceptual either. Instead, they seem to mark a later, perhaps more mature stage of his practice. At Kunsthalle, we witness him taking a step back from the exhausted criticism of capitalism exemplified by his *Good Ok Great Fantastic Perfect Grand Thank You* (2021) vitrines, which expose our materialistic hedonism with French exit flair, and turning towards painting. His *Empty Wardrobes* guarded by the vampire-ish portrait of *Tom*, suggest a constant bloodthirst of consumerism, but his sculptural *Geisters* or "ghosts" are more convincing. These figures, more than vessels conveying contemporary physical presence while being inwardly absent, nod

towards a lack of personality as urgent as today's fashion — where character is swapped for customization and personality for performance. And it suits Steyerl's poor image just perfectly.

Spichig paints through the screen pulls from Bernard Buffet's figurative paintings (1928-1999), perhaps his miserabilists. However, while Buffet's portraits such as "Toréador," "Emile," "Clown á la trompette," provide a palette of subjects, Spichig remains exclusively obsessed with his vampires; his "Geistesgeschichte". Through their natural thirst for blood, they become what humans hunger for — the cultural manifestations of the early 21st century. It's not necessarily that we want them, but that doesn't deny that we want them to want us. (They're akin to the February stage of this cuffing-season's crush.) As long as we're flesh, bones, and blood, not data, digital, uploaded or cornered all too accurately by our Instagram explorer page, the vampires still want us. It's a testimony against Tesla. Thus, in the company of Spichig's vampires, the modern man, not the modernist, finds comfort.

Vilda Krog Congratulations on the show, I was told the opening went well.

Tobias Spichtig It was great, my biggest show so far. I got invited by Elena Filipovic, and she's one of the most important curators of our time, so that in itself was a dream come true. Besides that, I've never shown institutionally in Switzerland before, just in The States, Germany, France, etcetera, or smaller New York galleries, which is fun obviously, but this one was different. The space in itself is legendary.

VK How long had it been in the works for?

TS Felt like I've been working on it for a decade.

VK That "my-whole-life" feeling?

TS Almost, but not really. The show isn't a retro perspective, all works are new and, in all honesty, I finished most of them on a tight deadline just before the opening. That being said, a lot of pieces and ideas that I've been developing in the past came together and suddenly this brand new composure made so much sense. But to answer your question in a more practical way — I got the invitation in April, so it hasn't even been a year, which is crazy to me.

VK Let's go back to the opening for a second, I know you brought in Mick Barr to complement the evening through his sound.

TS I did indeed. He's a great musician and artist, making drawings too, but mostly known for his metal music. He's also whom I listened to as I was making the paintings. I usually just put one track or artist on endless repeat, and he was The One. Once I realized that it would be cool to complement the show with a score, it only felt natural to reach out to Mick. I asked him to create a short piece, just a few riffs, but then it ended up lending itself to almost an entire album. The way I see it, It's no longer just a complementary sound but his own piece in the exhibition. We'll see what happens with it.

VK In your interview with Oliver Zahm you mentioned how "a good painting is as if a star would sing live constantly," were your paintings still singing once Barr closed his set?

TS My idea of painting is similar to that of music; a feeling or sensation you couldn't explain with words, but something which you could return to emotionally, that keeps showing up everywhere — putting you back into that sensation—once you're truly touched by it. There are several iconic paintings that show themselves to me everywhere I go, I just love that. It drags you back in.

VK Are Francis Picabia's paintings all around your surroundings, then?

[grins]

VK He has this great quote which, well, I'm paraphrasing now, but "in order to have clean ideas, change them like shirts." This was once he divorced dada. How often do you change shirts?

TS Sometimes, not all too often. I like t-shirts and garments in general that are worn until they fall apart.

VK Then you should see my shoes at this point. I like how subjective "often" is in this context.

TS I somewhat agree with him [Picabia], though. T-shirts do become dirty after a while, but the way I see it, is that depending on who wears them, they can look better when worn out, or even smell nice if one likes the person who wears it, but then they can also smell bad, and look like shit. I'm not an artist who has a lot of ideas. I tend to stick to what I like, once I've been able to find out what that is.

Picabia claimed to do a lot of "different things" but at the end of the day he worked continuously with his abstractions and clear figurations, which aren't to say these aren't great works — I enjoy them, and they were very impactful for later artists, Warhol and so on, which is why I have an interest in Picabia himself.

VK For his impact rather than his practice?

TS More for his insanely beautiful paintings.

VK What about your own practice, I'm thinking about the various mediums you span — installation, sculpture, painting?

TS I see myself as a painter because that's how I work on a daily basis, likewise it's what I truly love doing. My figurative and abstract works run in parallel, or in close proximity to one another, almost always oil on linen, canvas, or wood. Once every now and then I make some sculptures. I'm rather traditional — not an elaborate sculpture, so to speak — nor do I necessarily try to be. The figurative sculptures look a bit like ghosts, very classical in terms of poses, the creasing and details. Much like renaissance marble sculptures but out of clothing and resin. Their name ["Geist," German] translates to both ghosts and to spirit, I would describe it as a way of thinking, or a specific ethereal presence. They're a bit like creatures, at the same time they're not really visible, so while being present, they're also absent. Which ties them back into the spirit in painting.

VK What struck me about them is how they feel like advocates for how fashion has moved away from character to custom; everybody can perform anything, while the personality is being compromised, thus they're empty.

TS Oh, that's funny. I quite think the opposite. If it's even that complex. My idea originally came from depictions of shady figures and the personification of death in paintings that I was exposed to as a kid. They're very characteristic and almost comical individuals — anything but custom, a main character. But then again, due to their empty/openness, one can imagine things of their own in them.. I like to leave my work very concrete, yet open at the same time, even more so in my paintings.

To me, fashion is constantly over but still always present. It's a weird tension, one that is interesting to me — it somehow always remains, and reinvents; that's a good characteristic. While art, on the other hand, always documents this tension in a less tangible form, thus remains timeless. I'm after iconic images.

VK I heard that you initially created them out of your friend's old clothes; are they there to remind you of the fact that you're alone or rather always in company?

TS Both and neither, think of how children talk to their imaginary friends, gradually they're becoming more real and absolut, but then suddenly, they're gone.

VK ... and then everybody assumed they're crazy for speaking to thin air.

VK What about the title, *Everything No One Ever Wanted*? It feels like a pretty accurate comment on our current — I wouldn't want to say cultural, but general, climate.

TS I don't feel concerned about culture, rather I think it should have its natural way of progressing, even if that's a messy one. The avant-gardes were really messy, but instead of stressing out on visual appearances we named them the avant-gardes, it's possible that that took away from what they were creating. Speaking personally, I'm fed by disorder, and fine with the fact that I can't do or see everything all at once. The exhibition is a response to what I'm seeing, and as far as I'm concerned it might just be what the title suggests.

VK Is it making a comedy out of a tragedy?

TS Well, every serious situation also has a funny component. But I wouldn't call the show a comedy, even though there are some satirical elements to it. It's more a tragic comedy, with all its melancholy and glam. There's no good joke without a serious baseline. I'm drawn to big subjects in seemingly simple things. Andy Warhol was, and still is, the master of that.

VK I'm in the city of his ghost — what about him?

TS I have admired both his work and him for as long as I can remember, he is a master at creating beautiful things.

VK I wouldn't call the Campbells all too pretty.

TS Really? I think it's the most beautiful and poetic painting. Concept and visuals are all the same to me, and his ability to anchor and address and then deliver on those messages — that fascinates me. That's beauty. Soup has never looked so glamorous.

VK Then what's "embarrassing," you proposed the act of painting as such? Feels like a provocative thing to say.

TS Perhaps it is. The more immediate the more chance a painting has to fail, but oftentimes that's exactly the consequence of something that has energy; again, it's like standing on a stage, if not similar to an actor once they fall out of character — it ends up being the best part of the performance, because of the energy that came out of it.

VK Because it's somewhat more true, and honest?

TS An image doesn't lie. But I don't claim honesty to be a criteria, neither in sculpture nor in painting. It's rather a kind of surrender; we can no longer pretend that something is what it's not.

VK I'll take that.

TS All I want is to make beautiful things.

VK You're obsessed with beauty?

TS Pretty much.

VK Says the artist who instead created *Everything No One Ever Wanted* — we're unwrapping interesting layers here.

TS [laughs]

VK What more to me is how comforting these "vampires" turns out to be, the more one stares at them the more reassuring they feel, functioning as proof to human's flesh and blood, rather than her robust Chat GPT history — as long as the vampire still wants me, I must be living and alive.

TS Oh, that's a nice one. I do think that the dark figures, oftentimes the monster, the villain or whatever, somehow carries the most humane stories. They've got both sensitivity and idiocy. The gravestones on the other hand, they're cold. A sketch for the afterlife or the portal to the immortal.