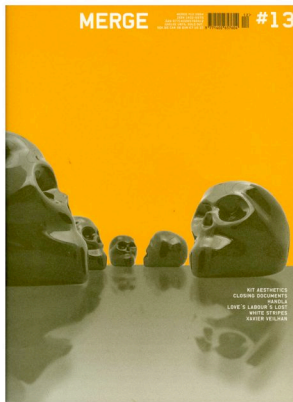


2004

Talking about the new is just so last Friday. On the other hand, by saying the same we always create something new. In the art of Xavier Veilhan this becomes very clear. In his work he is using all kinds of different strategies and different materials, connecting and re-connecting things and contexts. Instead of thinking that changing something means doing the opposite, which simply means reversing the image in the mirror and continuing to do the same, the work of Veilhan is all about changing the way things change. Or as Nike put it in a recent ad: “On our way to innovation we passed something beautiful.”





2004

I know of few artists who take on the idea of the "image" from so many different positions as Xavier Veilhan, takes that often leaves the image in a state of ambiguity. Not even the word "image" remains stable. Not only does Veilhan put the image as such in a complex position, he also plays with the "image" of the image, whether this concerns painting, photo, film or works in three dimensions. A simple way of putting it would be to say that Veilhan works with the recognizable, but with a slight distortion that leaves the well known unstable. His paintings often find a position between photo-realism and extreme flatness, like a merge between Chuck Close and Edouard Manet. Veilhan continues this "in-between" relationship in his photographic and computer-generated images, almost always printed to recall painting.

Veilhan's sculptures of policemen, various animals, motorcycles or the French Republican guard plays on the same kind of uncertainty. In this they resemble the art of American Charles Ray, and like Ray, when Veilhan uses more formal shapes they are transformed into the (slightly) unexpected. Veilhan isn't building on shock; uncanny and even funny are words that are more to the point. Speaking of naming things, when Veilhan talks about his more naturalistic sculptures he doesn't use the usual "object", but "statue," a noun that insists on a more political reading of the

works. However, not every work is obviously political; among the sculptures we also find such different things as an over-sized sculpture of a skeleton made in wickerwork and a bright-red monochrome rhino. The skeleton is also an example of how Veilhan works with contradicting the form with the content. Skeletons aren't made of wickerwork; in fact wicker works connote something nice and cosy that the skeleton can be only to a bunch of heavy-metal fans. A bunch that probably would strongly oppose the idea of a skeleton in wickerwork anyway.

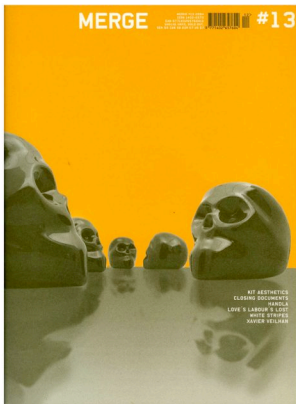
The same kind of contrast is at work in the machines Veilhan has constructed, where high-tech meets low-tech in various formations. The most beautiful example is also the most recent: Veilhan had stored short video clips on small memory chips that were projected on a screen consisting of a thousand or so light bulbs, creating a warm flickering that is reminiscent of old photographs or even etchings.

The contradiction is a productive force in the art of Xavier Veilhan, something that has been acknowledged already by, for instance, Dan Cameron. In a catalogue for an exhibition at Magasin in Grenoble a few years ago, Cameron describes, very much to the point, how Veilhan "succeeds in challenging us to maintain two entirely contradictory points of view in

mind at the same time." In the very same Catalogue, Liam Gillick notes how the Veilhan works exposes "the progressive sequence of psychological screening that is erected in front of us" and concludes that Veilhan is "...a master of the unwitting exposure of our attraction to and simultaneous repulsion from the key-makers of our constructed world."

The "productive" contradiction in Veilhan's art, then, takes place in the images. In other words, for all the thoughtful ideas, Veilhan remains a visual artist, but not a visual artist who is naive about the powers of image. On the contrary, Veilhan scrutinizes the images, but with visual means. In fact, the art of Veilhan is comprised of a continuous examination and questioning of various visual strategies; perhaps it would be most fitting to call him a conceptual visual artist. Fitting as this description might be, it is yet only based on the status of the image in Veilhan's art. But there remains a lot to be said about the way the individual art works relate to each other. In the art of Xavier Veilhan, each work has a potential relationship to any other work, with which it is able to form a new constellation. This is an important aspect of the art of Xavier Veilhan, that isn't dealt with to any larger extent. And since it is a question of transforming meaning by merging elements, this is the obvious topic for this essay.





2004

It is quite surprising that one can talk of the art of Veilhan when one considers the variation of themes, forms, expressions, medias and contents. One can, of course, divide and group the artworks into different areas. However, these areas or fields will keep together only momentarily, since in the art of Xavier Veilhan, any area can potentially form an alliance with any other area. Veilhan continuously connects his older art works with newer ones in ways that actually brings them all together. If anything, Veilhan is a connecting artist.

Veilhan connects in several different ways. One of the most complicated ways follows form, usually quite simple forms. The monochrome circle is emblematic. I think that there has been a monochromatic circle in most of Veilhan's shows. It can be black; in fact it can be a record with cut-out silhouettes in it as in a show at Jennifer Flay, in 1994. It can be white and large and rotate on the floor, as in Spinning Machines (1995). It can be green and form the top of furniture, as in Le Studio (1993). It can also be enormous and for the landing platform for a helicopter, as in Graz in Austria 1997 or in Villa Medici in Rome 1998 or it can be used in several different ways as in the recent film Drumball. The interesting thing is of course not the occurrence of circle per se, the interesting thing is that it occurs in so many contexts.

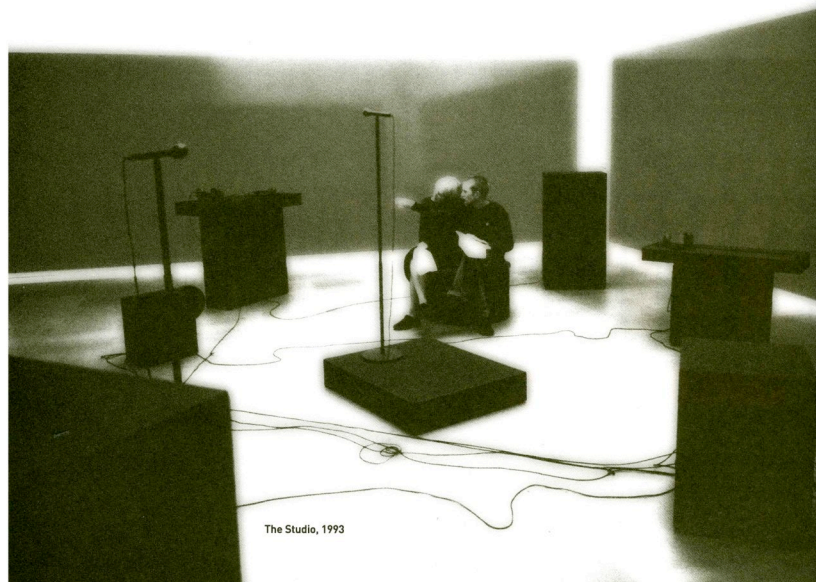
Now, the re-occurrence of a circle in many different contexts might just be coincidental. But the same kind of "re-use" (or de-use) is visible in more "limited" visual forms, for instance the silhouettes of Paris monuments of 1993 recurred in quite a few exhibitions. But there are also more striking examples of how Veilhan lets a work of art play a new role in a new constellation. In a show in Gothenburg, Sweden, last year Veilhan showed a full-scale rhino "originally" made for Sandra Gering Gallery and shown in Yves-Saint Laurents shop in NYC in 1999, in a forest made out of felt, "originally" shown in Geneva 1998 and without inhabitants. Here, the two old artworks formed a new work of art. In Veilhan's world, a piece of art is never stable, is never finished, as the new constellations tend to transform the artworks from exhibition to exhibition. A form that can have many different meanings is seldom restricted to one of them, on the contrary, it is very much allowed to have as many meanings as possible open for interpretation.

But what does this mean? What, if any, is it that allows Veilhan to "connect things" the way he does, and what is it that allows us to talk about his "art" as if it was a coherent thing? As Xavier Veilhan pointed out in a conversation from 1997, there is no formal unity among his art works. This is something that Véronique D'Auzac de Lamaritane emphasized in her article on Veilhan's art in Parkett: "His (Veilhan's) trajectory springs not from a temporal progression of forms, nor from a stylistic evolution subject to linear causality." D'Auzac de Lamaritane concludes this reasoning with "...all attempts to categorizing his work will necessary fail." Granted, if categorizing equals style or the alike.

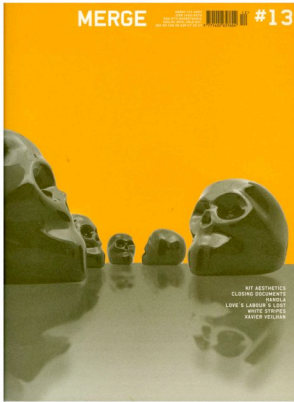
D'Auzac de Lamaritane is of course interested of another aspect of Veilhan's artworks. Her article deals more with how the artworks leave the beholder in a position between belief and doubt, and it is an analysis with great merits. This does mean, however, that the way Veilhan constantly transforms the meaning in each artwork by bringing different works together in new constellations is left out. In the following I will try to suggest a few ways of understanding this aspect a bit more thoroughly. I will take off from the reasoning of philosopher Nelson Goodman and his understanding of "world-making," and de-tour through Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between "language" and "parole," ending up in both some old as well as quite recent new media theories.

The art of world making

In a superficial use of the notion, every artist is a world maker, since he or she is creating some kind of reality that wasn't there before. One might think of novelist in general and in authors of fairy-tales in particular. In another way of thinking, no-one is a world-maker since we all draw



The Studio, 1993



2004

from a mutual heritage that simply offers all pieces for the puzzle we ordinary call a "creative act". Nobody produces new stories: everybody but interprets what was already always there. Such post-structural trains of thoughts might not only serve as interesting points, but are also important reminders and remedies against the cult of the genius. However, as they tend to be the most common arguments against just

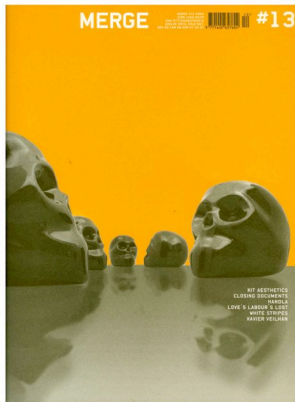
about everything, they are often no less shallow than the idea that every artist is a maker of worlds.

Something happened already in Veilhan's first shows at Facsimile in Milan in the early '90s. Here, Veilhan exhibited paintings of animals on the walls and sculptures of animals without "skin" on the floor. The paintings related of course to each other and to the

tradition of realistic painting, but they also stood in close relationship to the sculptures. This relationship was not about painting and sculpture being different aspects of the same thing (whichever animal was represented), it was more a question of what kind of relationship existed between the actual painting and the actual sculpture exhibited. As paintings only depict what is on the surface, the sculpture depicted



The Forest, 1998



what was seen beneath the surface. To put it somewhat differently, the "content" of the painting was standing on the floor, which might be described as a comment on the classic "form-content" issue. Be that as it may, what happened was that a certain relationship became established between the painting and the sculpture, where one might say that the one was incomplete without the other. When recalling these early shows, Veilhan relates them "... to a desire to draw up a basic vocabulary: a lexicon or a common language which would form the basis of a sort of consensus language."

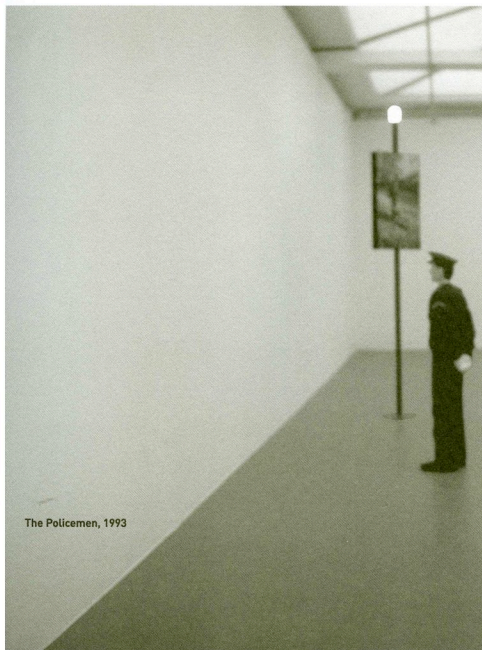
There are two obviously different kinds of significations going on here. As symbols, the painting of the horse and the sculpture of the horse both point to the idea of the "horse". As painting and sculpture, they refer to their respective traditions. But they also refer to each other to such extent that it might be difficult to see them as different works, rather than two sides of the same work. Not only as solitary works that obtain part of their "meaning" in relation to a whole, but as pieces of the very same work. Yet not even this interpretation is self-evident. Not every painting had its counterpart in a sculpture. In fact, there were none apart from their contextual placing, there were nothing that said that the sculptures and the paintings belonged. And context does change. As a matter of fact, after the show at Facsimile, the sculptures and the paintings were exhibited separately and in different contexts. This, however, has turned out to be significant for how Veilhan works. Items, artworks, can function in one context, a context that largely defines the artworks' "meaning". Later on, the same work pops up in another context, new relationships are established, and new meanings are developed. Contextual reframings of the artworks are very much at the core of how Veilhan works with developing meaning, where each exhibition depends on old meanings to establish new ones, that in the long run retroactively alter the old meanings. . . .

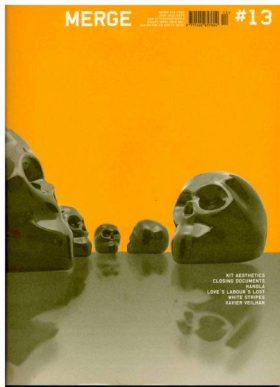
An artist like Rene' Magritte might qualify as a world-maker. In his art, there are certain forms that repeatedly reoccur in various and different situations, which make the meaning of each element

change with the context. In fact, the meaning the beholder experiences in front of a Magritte depends to a large extent on how well acquainted he or she is with the other works of Magritte. Having seen a few, one tends to recognize the elements in a way where the "meaning" of one painting spills over to the next.

In the art of Veilhan, to create a "world" is not to create items that establish a mutual context by having something visually recognizable (like form, technique or "manner") in common. To be a world maker is more than producing art that will allow an audience to recognize them as "Veilhan's" in the same way you might recognize a Caravaggio, a Picasso or a Renee Magritte. That would mean that the world is revolving around likeness, and to opt for such an explanation for Veilhan's works will, as D'Auzac de Lamaritane had it, necessarily fail. Style might be used as a means, as ways of creating bodies in a world. But there are also a lot of other world-making means available that have little, or nothing, to do with style, something that is emphasized by the fact that Veilhan makes use of so many different materials, resources and expressions. Indeed, the variety of means might qualify as one of the reasons why the works of Veilhan form a coherent "world" that has little to do with the idea of "style".

But it is also important that that the world doesn't form a coherent whole on a solely conceptual level, i.e., the parts of the world





2004

cannot be said to investigate the same field. This also holds true for other artists for whom the notion "world" might adequately describe what is essential to their corpus, like, for instance, Swedish artist Henrik Häkansson. Häkansson too forms a world with his artworks, in fact, the only way his different means, may it be a record player or some strange insect of sorts, consists of a coherent whole is by being part of the same kind of world.

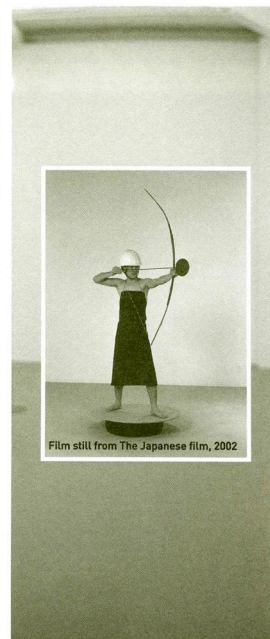
Nelson Goodman

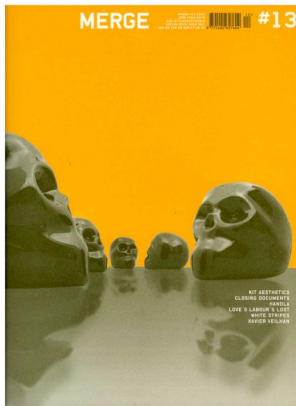
In his books *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978) and the classic *Languages of Art* (1976), philosopher Nelson Goodman has tried to outline the ways artistic and visual language function. Although these thoughts might have little to do with Veilhan directly, there are some aspects I find interesting for understanding how Veilhan "connects things". Goodman does indeed give certain keys to understanding how art communicates by focusing on how the "worlds" created depend upon other "worlds" already known. In the introduction to *Languages of Art* Goodman writes that his main objective is to develop a general theory of symbols, which, of course, turns out to have to deal with the system symbols function in. That is, what a symbol signifies depends not only on the symbol and the symbols relationship to what it represent, it also depends on said symbols relationship to other symbols in the same system. This is perhaps most visible in how Goodman describes what "realism" is. How correct a picture is, argues Goodman, depends on the how we read the picture according to it's system: "But how literal or realistic the picture is depends upon how standard the system is." Thus: "...realism is a matter of habit."

The idea of a system is of course of importance in *Ways of Worldmaking* too. In fact, the system and the world are inseparable, and one might argue that they at times are the very same thing. That is, we live in a world containing systems of symbols, and the meaning of a certain symbol depends on the system it belongs to. The world is thus not only (maybe not at all) the things that surround us, because the world cannot be separated from the systems that make that same world understandable. When we are to make "new"

worlds, then, we are directed to the world we already live in, otherwise they wouldn't make any sense at all. Goodman writes: "Worldmaking always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking." But he also concludes that his main interest is not about the world-making as such, but about how the various worlds relate to each other: "Actually, I am more concerned with certain relationships among the worlds than how or whether particular worlds are made from others."

There are many aspects of Goodman's writing that reminds of how Ernst Gombrich, in books like *Art and Illusion* from the early sixties argue about how visual signs communicate. Although Gombrich's works have been admired by scholars ever since, he has also been criticized for explaining the development of the visual signs we call art with references to the art world, as if the history of art had more to do with other art than with anything else in the world. In *Vision and Painting*, Norman Bryson points out that much more of the changes within the field of art and visual communication have to do with changes on a broader cultural, social and political field. Would the same kind of critique also apply to Goodman? That would need a closer examination on what Goodman means when he claims that building worlds always is





2004

about starting from an already existing one. Does the "world at hand" include all the social, cultural and political aspects, or is it limited to certain stylistic, format characteristics?

To answer that the "world at hand" is of course the world in its entirety, including all aspects, would be to say that to study a sign system is to study the discourse it is formed within. This is obviously the way the art of Veilhan is formed. In an exhibition in 1993 at the Musée d'art Moderne de Ville Paris, Veilhan exhibited slightly undersized sculptures of faceless policemen, seemingly patrolling a room that displayed photographs of the artist himself, playing a policeman doing silly things. Here law and order was taken down, made less a threat, something making the show comment upon contemporary issues, as there recently had been several cases of severe police brutality. In another show at the MUHKA [1993] he presented large silhouettes of well-known public sculptures where the entrance was blocked by a sculpture forming a rostrum, followed up by several sculptures made for sitting on in the exhibition room. Here Veilhan commented on the public sphere, asking not only about what has been appointed to take place there and by whom, but also asking the public as such to literally take place. The questions about public space have been at core of Veilhan's works, whether it has shown him "flying" from a crane above a round-about, or putting together a Model-T Ford. But everything isn't about the public sphere in Veil-

han's works; another train in his art is art history, be it the clear primary colors of modernism in the installation Paris at Jennifer Flay in 1991, or the language of flat images of Edouard Manet and Diego Velasquez – traits that blend and merge, of course, as in the prints showed at Sandra Gering in 1997.

All together

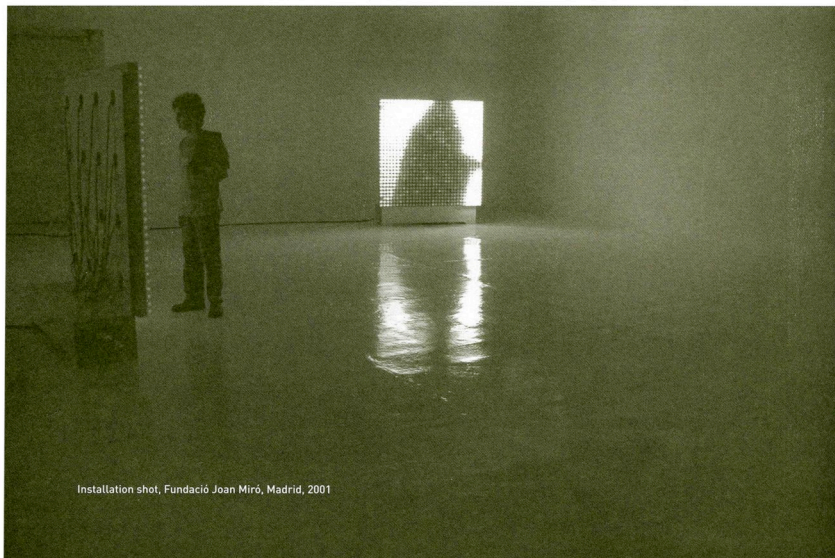
The "world" of Xavier Veilhan is obviously following what Goodman holds at the core for creating a world, it comprises of bits and pieces already known from the "world at hand". It is also obvious that the elements bring some of their original meaning into the new environment. But as the recent examples also show, the world of Veilhan does not consist of a stylistic or even a conceptual whole. They still form some kind of unit. However, not every work of art within this world stands in close relation to every other work, but they still form a coherent whole by other means than merely being products of the same artist. One is reminded of the title of the old Dave Brubeck live album: We're all together again (for the first time).

No, pointing to Veilhan as the common denominator would not only be too simple, it would also be false. It would be false since every time Veilhan combines his artworks, he leaves more to the beholder. Because "meanings" of the art works tends to multiply by this action. One might compare this with how the later Ludwig Wittgenstein (during the fifties) conceived about "family-" and "game-" likeness. Not every member

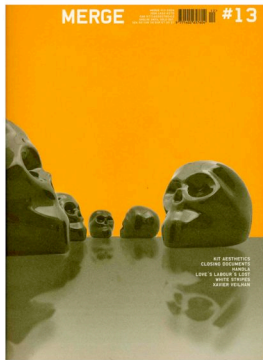
of a family has a direct relationship with each other, not all the games can be explained by the same basic rules. Yet they still form families and games.

To Veilhan, then, the artworks gain their meaning through a complex relation between external referents, such as politics or art history; and the internal referents which are, among other things, the art of Veilhan. To study the signs as a part of a larger discourse, as Veilhan seems to do, could be to say that to study signs is an aspect of sociology. Or, as Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure put it at the beginning of the 20th century it would be: to study the social play of the signs.¹¹ Goodman makes no references to Saussure, which is a bit peculiar, as Saussure's "semiotics" contain many aspects for understanding all kinds of signs and not only linguistic ones.¹² In fact, Saussure understood linguistics as a branch of a wider science that would include all kind of signs, a science he named "semiology".

Saussure might be interesting from our point of view, since he offers a two-folded model for how a language works, one that might supplement Goodman's description of how to form a world. While Goodman might help to explain how a world is formed (and Wittgenstein how it is kept together), Saussure might help to explain how exhibitions are formed, based on what exists in an aforementioned world. Saussure thinks of language as something that consists of two parts: a system with rules like spelling and grammar; and the



Installation shot, Fundació Joan Miró, Madrid, 2001



2004

way the individual makes use of them. Nobody, says Saussure, has access to the entire language; which makes it stale and difficult to change. On the other hand, slang develops and there are continually new words inserted from other communities, effects that in the long run change the language anyway.

When it comes to Veilhan's art, Saussure's system might turn out to be too hierarchic: although the system (la langue) is influenced by all the versions of the individual speech acts (la parole), it remains its source and provides guidelines for what is possible and outside the system. While this might help to explain how a certain exhibition forms meaning, it provides less for our understanding of the rather rapid influence this exhibition has on the "world". Or perhaps one should say, "worlds," not because there is a demarcation line between different fields in Veilhan's art, but because they convey their meaning by allowing each beholder to form his or her idea of that very world.

This might call for some clarification. Again; when an already existing artwork is picked from the larger whole (Veilhan's "world") to be put in a new context, it will both bring some of the "original" meaning with it, as well as gain new meaning in the new context. When the same image is brought to yet a new context, the two aforementioned "meanings" will be brought to the new context, and be given new meaning again. But there exists no real "rules" because it doesn't matter which situation comes first. If you see the Rhino in the

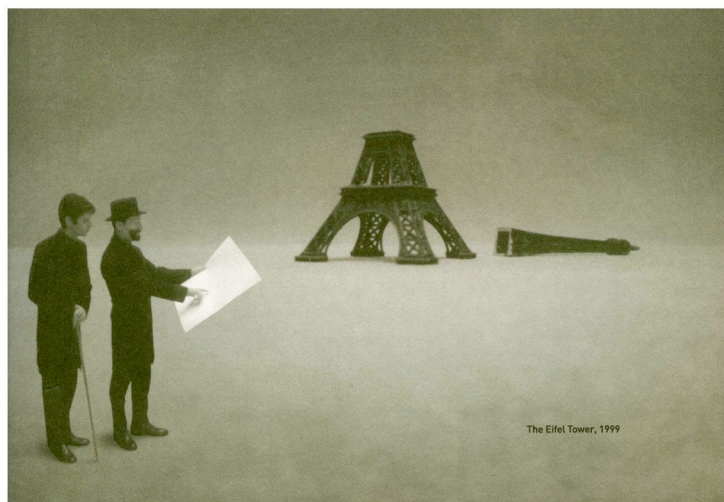
felt forest first, that will affect your understanding of the previous time it was shown (if you ever find out about it) and not the other way around. There is no first "time" that decides the original meaning, the original meaning is rather different for each person. This is quite similar to what computer theorist Ted Nelson called grand hypertext as early as in 1974.

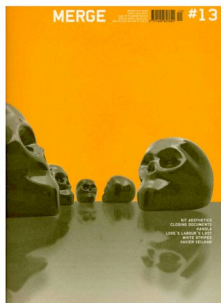
Hypertext is of course a somewhat worn-out phrase and is as all ex-buzzwords a bit tedious, difficult to use for anyone who wishes to be up-to-date. Nelson coined it already in the sixties, and I do think there are aspects of his description from Computer Lib/Dream Machines (1974) that still are useful for the perspective of this article. The idea of the grand hypertext summarizes both how the beholder can choose his/her own path through the world of Veilhan, as well as give a hint about how Veilhan works with that world as a material, as from an intra-connected database. Nelson of course writes about a future computer, the dream computer that will allow editors to connect material enabling users to interact with it in ways of their own choosing. Or as Nelson has it: "...in all the directions you wish to pursue" something that will allow for any possible pathway through, even for "People who have to have one thing explained to them at the time..."

Computers might very well be much like what Nelson hoped for, it's just that software, users and "editors", as Nelson asked for, haven't fully understood the potential yet. Or was the revolution so slow we didn't notice? Are we perhaps looking in the wrong places

when we are limiting our vision to computer applications? The way Xavier Veilhan connects various elements in his art might suggest that the "world" I have described could be understood as a database, where the "data" are allowed to transform and connect in all directions possible. Let's again consider the circle, which earlier was noted as a "form" or "item" visible in many of Veilhan's artworks and exhibitions. It may not be a major feature, but it reoccurs often enough to be "saturated" with meaning. In the film Drumball the circle is used in at least four different ways, ways that continually transform and alter the circle's meaning. Or maybe one should say that meaning is transformed in that new meaning gets added on top of the old one, in a layer-upon-layer fashion that reminds one of the standard working process in photoshop.

In Drumball, the circle occurs for the first time with its making, when a woman in a white jacket pours a thick black fluid from a jar onto a table, that after a while forms a perfect round-shaped pond. Next, it reveals itself as a Frisbee that is thrown between two men wearing black outfits. The next time we encounter the black circle, it has grown in size considerably and multiplied in number, as several man-sized circles hang down from the ceiling and form something in-between screens and mobiles; and lastly we find the same large-shaped circles combined with sticks, used as what might be best described as large brooms, by the very same men, now riding roller-skates.





2004

One could say that Veilhan works with many different forms of collage, sometimes bringing different items together in a new work of art. Sometimes they connect in a more associative fashion, in a way that could again bring the surrealism of Magritte to mind. But that is too limiting. It would be to focus on what Veilhan connects and combines, and to forget about how he does it. But since the elements connect in so many different ways, I'd like to argue that understanding the how is essential. One could say that it is the how that allows all the combinations that comprise the world of Veilhan. The way Veilhan connects elements from his world could be reflected in how media theorist Lev Manovich differentiates between "narrative" and "database". The traditional film, writes Manovich has supported the "narrative" with its clear beginning and end and its dramatic construction. The database, however, promotes another way of thinking, where bits and pieces are allowed to connect in all possible ways. A little like the old avant-garde used the collage, says Manovich, who concludes by arguing that the avant-garde has now turned into every-day practice. In fact, it has turned into software.

Manovich also suggests, perhaps more importantly, that the every-day practice of the collage and the use of the database is likely to mean more profound changes in terms of how we actually think. The widespread use of computers might just change the way we are likely to think about how to connect things. Or maybe it is the other way around, the fact that artists like Xavier Veilhan have prepared us for the logic of the database, and thus, for the computer age. In any case, it is in this world that the world-making of Veilhan makes sense. As Manovich argues; since the world lacks a constructing force, might it be religion or science, it appears as an endless and unstructured collection of data, and it is only appropriate that we model it as a data base. He concludes with what might serve as a description for Veilhan's practice: "But it is also appropriate that we want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database."¹⁴

It is probably a coincidence that Veilhan started to build his world in the exhibition where he showed paintings of animals together with sculptures of animals "without" skin. As time would reveal, it wasn't the separation between "form" and "body" that turned out to be crucial. It was all the possible connections.

¹ Dan Cameron, "Keeping up Appearances" in Xavier Veilhan Magasin, 2000

² Liam Gillick "Eastworld: Xavier Veilhan's mirrored context" in Xavier Veilhan 2000

³ Xavier Veilhan in Xavier Veilhan Editions JRP, Geneva, 1997 page 26

⁴ D'Auzac de Lamaritane, Veronique, "The Logical Work of Xavier Veilhan", Parkett #64 (2002) page 14.

⁵ Xavier Veilhan in Xavier Veilhan Editions JRP, Geneva, 1997

⁶ Languages of Art page 38

⁷ Ways of Worldmaking page 7

⁸ Art and Illusion was reprinted as late as last year by Phaidon Press

⁹ See Vision and painting : the logic of the gaze Yale University Press, 1983

¹⁰ See Philosophical Investigations. Reprinted last year by Blackwell.

¹¹ Ferdinand de Saussure Course in general linguistics (compiled after Saussure's death). Numerous of reprints, for insatnce Open Court Publishing Company 1988

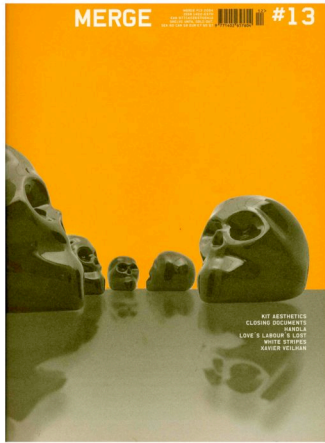
¹² Goodman does however make references to Charles Saunders Pierce, who at roughly at the same time as Saussure made similar observations about sign systems. The noun "semiotics" is in fact from Pierce.

¹³ Nelson, Ted Computer Lib/Dream Machines in Multimedia From Wagner to Virtual Reality Norton 2001, page 160.

¹⁴ Lev Manovich The Language of New Media (2001) page 219

Håkan Nilsson





2004

