

37

'Working Class Abstractions'

– Ina Blom

45

The Gentle Art of Breeding Monsters:

Bjarne Melgaard and the Political

– Bart De Baere

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
**ALL GYMQUEENS
DESERVE TO DIE**



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At the time, it seemed like a clear enough concept. This is 1993, on the opening night of a brand new Stockholm gallery. In the middle of an exhibition consisting of bleak writings and drawings on the wall – 'like telephone doodles', in the words of the press release – the artist Bjarne Melgaard, outfitted in a brand-new Thierry Mugler jacket, picks up the gallery phone and places a call to his boyfriend in Oslo.¹ The call – which may or may not be experienced as a performance – soon evolves into a full-blown quarrel. The boyfriend does not appreciate Melgaard's antics. He does not like being drawn into an art situation in this way. He finds Melgaard's work, his aesthetic strategies, meaningless and exploitative – and tells him so, loud and clear. Melgaard, not one to mince his words, gives as good as he gets, all the while discreetly popping his habitual pills. But in the heat of the moment they spill out of his pocket and all over the floor, pathetic figures of a situation out of control.

If it was a performance – and the press release had certainly announced it as such – it was a performance gone wrong. Actually, Melgaard had imagined the whole thing in less specific and more cautious terms: not even really a performance, but more of a coolly ephemeral pose: a well-dressed lover's phone exchange set off by an ephemeral wall drawing. Something more in the spirit of the polished melancholy of a George Michael song, where gusts of passion and cruelty are kept in check by one of the strictest design programmes in the history of pop. And yet the terms of the failure – the all-out pathos, the lack of control – were also to become the terms of Melgaard's success in the late 1990s. Those were the insignia that made it possible to read his work in terms of the then-current discourse of transgression and abjection, a starkly anti-formalist and 'anti-aesthetic' undermining of the values of white heterosexist culture and its privileged symbolic and aesthetic forms. The notion of performance (or a performative accessing of the real) was obviously key to this artistic paradigm; the more outrageous, the better. This was, after all, the time of the positive re-evaluation of the work of the Vienna Actionists, of Carolee Schneemann, of Valie Export. It was also the moment when Detroit depression joined LA slacker culture in the gut-wrenchingly limp offerings of Mike Kelley, where failure took on a distinctly critical edge for the first time. All over the Western art world, male artists were either crying or pissing in their pants, or both.

At first glance, Melgaard's work seemed only too well adapted to this context. In an epoch of chaotic installation work, Melgaard appeared intent on trumping all in terms of pure disorderly *mass*, in a refusal to provide points of orientation or the possibility of survey. Walls were covered with drawings, handwritten notes, manuscripts for unfinished novels, photographs and cut-outs from fashion or news magazines, which were again covered by paintings, framed watercolours, gouaches and designer shopping bags. Tables heaped with objects of all kinds – books, stacks of drawings, medication, records, clothing, wax figures and bronze sculptures – barred access to the walls. Scribbles and drawings covered the surfaces of the bronze sculptures and wax figures; a dense smattering of written-on yellow Post-it notes covered every possible object. Huge pieces of knitted fabric divided the space or lay heaped in corners: endless strings of crocheted wool criss-crossed the room. Half-opened crates and boxes revealed more

1 Bjarne Melgaard, solo exhibition, Ynglingagatan 1, Stockholm, September 1993.

objects, more paintings. In the factory buildings that housed parts of Manifesta 2 in 1998, a huge painting floated in an indoor swimming pool constructed for the occasion.² Other paintings were scattered around the water's edge amongst trees decorated with toilet roll and a monitor showing a short film of penguins with comments written directly on the celluloid in black marker pen.

Faced with this chaos, critics tended to focus on what seemed to be the only fixed points. Attention would go towards anything suggestive of a theme or a narrative, instances, apparently, of representation or opinion. In the beginning, most of these seemed laudable enough. Youthful Scandinavian depression – cool! Oedipal aggression against academic Minimalists – right on! Articulations of the reality of gay sexuality – great! As time passed, however, the points of orientation seemed less laudable and increasingly fell outside the canon of transgressive art practice. Extreme drug-driven bodybuilding – anyone? Black metal right-wing church burners? Suicidal addiction? Gay death cult snuff Internet files? The implicit violence of such themes triggered the closure of several exhibitions – including a big museum show at the MARTa Herford – for offending public sensibility.³ With violence, and the lack of any clearly articulated denunciation of violence in the work itself, Melgaard's work was, paradoxically,



Bjarne Melgaard, 'Up Late', Galleri Riis, Oslo, 1994, installation view

increasingly conflated with the world of simple representation or information. All of a sudden it was as if it was simply expressive of a social reality in relation to which it seemed to have no critical distance.

Alternatively – thanks to the justifications of curators actually exhibiting this material – a critical position was invented, this time in the name of ethnographic documentation-cum-self-representation. To read, for instance, Beate Ermacora (the curator of a particularly dark and difficult exhibition at Kunsthalle zu Kiel) is to be taught to appreciate the violence of Melgaard's work as a sort of social reportage that sheds critical light on marginal and little-known social phenomena.⁴ Why an essentially ethnographic project should be so chaotic and unwieldy in its use of texts, objects and imagery, so given to self-contradiction and obliqueness, was not really answered. That is, it was implicitly associated with the realm of personal experience, as if this chaos was just the natural discharge of a troubled subcultural self charging through the walls of the art institution. Since, on an explicit level, it was associated with the self-mutilation

2 Bjarne Melgaard, 'Artist in search of God within his own limitations (an indoor swimming pool for Yolanda the Jack Smith Pinguin)', Manifesta 2, 1998, Luxembourg.

3 Bjarne Melgaard, 'Black Low: The Punk Movement Was Just Hippies with Short Hair', MARTa Herford, 2002. The exhibition was closed by the legal authorities for its depiction of violence, but was reopened later on. A recent shooting accident in the local community seems to have influenced public opinion concerning the relation between violence and artistic expression.

4 Bjarne Melgaard, 'Interface to God', Kunsthalle zu Kiel, 2002. As in 'Black Low', Melgaard was processing material related to gay snuff film milieus and to the cults of violence in Black Metal.



'The Red Gate',
SMAK, Ghent, 1996,
installation view

actions of Abramovic, Brouwn, Brus, Burden, Gerz and Schwarzkogler, this self was ultimately validated in terms of institutional critique: Melgaard was said to be testing 'the conceptual boundaries of art' through the (violent) use of his own person.⁵ As Ann Demeester, curator of the closed MARTa Heford show, glibly asserted, 'it is hard to know where art stops and reality begins'.⁶

But, given the fact that very little systematic evidence of such personal bodily implication in the space of the work itself actually exists, how hard could it really be? The 1996 telephone event was, after all, a crashing failure, never intended to function on such a level of intimacy at all. In fact, it seemed that critics had a far harder time paying attention to the highly *impersonal* material force of Melgaard's chaos and contradiction and the exact role of the non-assimilable elements at play within it. What was never really addressed was a peculiar project of abstraction that seemed to inform this work from the beginning: a sort of counterintuitive project of abstraction, an abstraction against all odds and hard to grasp given the insistent use of real objects, readable images and well-known social and cultural phenomena. And yet, the work could be seen to perform a continual muting or obstruction of reference to social reality,

5 Beate Ermacora, 'Interface to God', in Beate Ermacora (ed.), *Bjarne Melgaard. Société Anonyme* (exh. cat.), Kiel: Kunsthalle zu Kiel, 2002, pp.65–69.

6 Ann Demeester, 'Non Serviam, No Answers, Keine Antworten', in Ann Demeester (ed.), *Bjarne Melgaard. Black Low. The Punk Movement Was Just Hippies with Short Hair* (exh. cat.), Herford: MARTa Herford, 2002, p.27.

a type of operation that returns, incongruently enough, to the questions and problems that had informed early painterly abstraction and that had been left dormant in the wake of the post-1960s polarisation between an increasingly apolitical formalism and a conceptualism that had become the proper name of politically oriented art.

No manifesto or statement on this form of abstraction is to be found anywhere in Melgaard's practice. No consistent theory or method can be extrapolated from the work itself. Whatever exists are suggestions: bits and pieces, titles, headlines, words written on Post-it notes. But the suggestions return with a certain dogged obstinacy, ambivalently willing you to pay attention to them as well as to neglect them. A 1997 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam that was filled to the brim with a long series of fictional and semi-fictional personas (from Rudolf Valentino as an Arab sheik to 'Mr. Black Pearl', 'Raoul', 'Rob Bo'bel' and 'Bernard St. Summiere' to mention but a few) was somewhat curiously framed by a placard stating 'Free from content'.⁷ In the fragmentary text passages of the handwritten artist's book *Casanova in the South Pacific. A Novel* (1995), one could find a title that was a bit more specific: 'Working Class Abstractions'.⁸ The appellation resonated with numerous handwritten notes stuck on objects or paintings or simply spread around, and which would evoke 'blue collar' reality or class issues in one way or other: 'Abuse is the beauty of the working class' would be one example, 'Petit Bourgeoise Inntellectual' [sic] another. This last note – just to give the context – was scribbled in blue ballpoint pen on a piece of paper that also contained a collage consisting of two logos for Hotel Sofitel at Maeva Beach Tahiti and a cut-out of a commercial for 'une collection de livres à dévorer', as well as more ball-point scribbling: 'Hi, I'm the Hiva Oa dog named Rondi (who the fuck names a dog that) and I saw what Melgaard doubts he saw.' 'Also remembers my puppy also suddenly disaperd.' [sic] 'My own small library.' None of this makes much sense, of course, except as part of the continuity of a series of exhibitions where dogs, holiday resorts in the South Pacific and heaps of books all had a certain presence.

Whatever Melgaard meant by 'working class abstractions' is, therefore, hardly very clear. It certainly was never simply a reference to the artist's personal background, which is, if anything, mixed: solid middle class on the one side of the family, working class on the other. Neither was it a Scandinavian adaptation of the blue-collar identity that figures so prominently in the work of Mike Kelley, the distinctly un-heroic signifier of social abasement, degradation and waste that serves as the point of departure for Kelley's marked attack on the conventional aesthetic logic of the sublime (here identified as the aristocratic way of handling the overpowering experience of excess). Kelley's work may have courted chaos, but as part of a distinctly analytic and strategic project that unearthed the aesthetic logic of social layering in American culture. The force of Kelley's work lies in its ability to deliver precisely focused cultural critique through sensual performance: in the end a deeply pedagogical project.

Melgaard's project is, I believe, a very different one. To begin with, it is essentially committed to the practice of painting: that is, to the possibilities and impasses, the visual openings and taboos of a practice continually said to have come to an end, to the extent that for decades intelligent artists who felt they had some stake in the matter could only perform this end in one sense or the other. The choices they faced are well known: either to refuse to paint ... or to perform a sort of post-painting that could only reiterate its own distance from a technologically and socially obsolete form of manufacture as well as from the formalism that made modernist painting into the signpost for a dubious bourgeois institution. But this end-story could of course also be seen as a guilt-ridden monumentalisation of a single discourse of painting. What, then, if it was to be replaced by a less unifying account of painting's social history and its various technical and aesthetic correlates? What if the identity of modern Western painting in the end does not hinge on the question of a particular handicraft and its role in the production and self-representation of early modern society? After all, this identity already includes the memory of the drastic social and technological transformation that freed painting from the walls and spaces of ritualistic society, and made them into transportable objects or commodities within a nascent capitalist order.

7 Bjarne Melgaard, 'Free from Content', Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1997.

8 See Bjarne Melgaard, *Casanova in the South Pacific. A Novel*, Sydney: South Pacific Publishing Company, 1995.

From such a perspective one could suggest that what late industrial media society gives us is not exactly the end of painting but a painting that is less related to craft and representational practice (outmoded or not) than to a singular devotion to a sort of subterranean mobilisation of visibility. Painting (which from 1850 onwards presses against numerous other media formats) could be seen equally as a practice particularly and emphatically given to the articulation of whatever is unseeable and unspeakable in the increasingly controlled (and controlling) visual frameworks of a technocratic society. From this perspective the privileging of the modernist discourse that links painting to form could be seen as part of a drive to pacify or discipline this mobility, to capture it within the domain of the officially visible. In contrast, as Eric Alliez and Jean-Clet Martin suggest in a recent book, painting could just as well be understood as a mode of thinking that is diagrammatic in structure, less a set of forms than an activation of forces whose constructive capacities remain open to inspection.⁹



Artist in search of God within his own limitations (An outdoor swimming pool for Yolanda the Jack Smith Penguin), Manifesta 2, Luxembourg, 1998, installation view. Photograph by Roman Mensing/artdoc.de

In early modernity, colour, paint and spatial relations were among the key materials of this mode of thinking. Today we could say that no pre-established material, technique or procedure defines a form of painting whose operations could rather be said to resemble the convergence of technologies and materialities in the realm of information machineries. Within the peculiar form of painting practised by Bjarne Melgaard, the forces at work seem to bring out articulations of highly ambivalent social material, and in a way that obstructs any idea one might have of the communication of social relations in works of art. To say that Melgaard's work is essentially painterly, to move from his informal canvases to the multifarious installation materials that draw these canvases into an idiosyncratic media ecology, is also to say that this social material is itself informed by a distinct project of abstraction. As in the early modernism liberally quoted in Melgaard's work (this is, after all, an artist who paid intensive homage to

⁹ See Eric Alliez and Jean-Clet Martin, *L'Oeil-cerveau. Nouvelles histoires de la peinture moderne*, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2007.

the deeply unfashionable Paul Gauguin), one is induced to rethink the notion of new painterly realities, of painting as a plane of emergence for things as yet unknown. For what you get in Melgaard's work are not representations, more or less truthful, more or less 'total' in their scope, of some definite social reality – and whether this is lived social reality is a question that becomes moot – but the suggestive surging forth of new social surfaces or new lines of conflict, partly communicated through oblique visual and tactile material and partly through more or less coherent wording.

In this particular context, the concept of 'working class abstractions' can stand as a figure for the way in which half-digested or overdetermined memories, ideas, identities, subjectivities and points of view come together into social figures or constellations that are ill-defined and highly debatable, but which still have a bearing on our attempts to get to grips with a social everyday. There will be no coherent and well-defined blue-collar figures, then. You may, however, find an evocation of the intricate intertwining of gender and class, along lines that evoke the suggestion (made by art-porn filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, among others) that gay issues actually open onto new class issues, that class issues are actively suppressed in the celebration of gay 'lifestyle', and that no sexual politics can exist without some idea of the effect of social difference on the sexual margins. As Nicola Field bluntly puts it, so-called gay lifestyle is a specialised form of a middle-class consumer lifestyle that may be second nature to some but alienating to others, all the while flattering the gay 'community' with a positive notion of its difference.¹⁰

But in between torn-out pages from fashion magazines, Hermès shopping bags, bronze figurines of African couples conservatively dressed in fine wool and cashmere doll's clothes with their mouths sewn shut, wax figures of (and monuments to) deceased gay porn star Joey Stefano, oil paintings that seem to indicate the beginnings of some exceptionally delicate abstract/gestural landscape formation that has been left limp and as if unfinished, and hosts of hastily scribbled quips and denunciations to left and right, you will find no figure, either, of that elusive character, 'the working class gay man'. Nor, incidentally, of the bohemian/creative consumer bad-boy gay artist. All you find is the oblique testimony to the painful construction of relations, in the form of a sad crumpled pillow with the following words written in ballpoint pen: 'Joey's attempt to be creative.' On the plane of emergence created by Melgaard – a distinctly depressive plane where desire is always countered by addiction and laced with doctor's prescriptions – gay sexuality above all figures as an aesthetic/erotic continuum on which the potential for social conflict *in general* is projected, and where antagonisms are produced.

Here Melgaard's work seems to take a clue from the point made by Leo Bersani in the heat of the homophobic 1980s AIDS debates: the momentary 'loss of self' that, according to Freud, characterises sexual experience in general, and which becomes a potential source of conflict once sexual experience is projected onto social relations of submission and dominance, takes on its most dramatic aspect in the typical identification of the gay male with the idea of 'female submission'. Upturning hierarchies, male self-loss evokes everything that is intolerable and unspeakable, but only because of a culture that overvalues the notion of the self in the first place.¹¹ The common association of gay sexuality with loss is aggressively and absurdly repeated in the work of Melgaard, reiterated to the point of senselessness, through figures too numerous to describe in this short text. But what counts is not this phobic determination of gayness in itself or the abject positions it evokes. What counts is the way in which it serves to constitute a sort of strange painterly 'non-ground' or 'un-ground' in Melgaard's work – a highly strategic lack of grounding in the figure of the self or the subject around whom either representations or forms would gather. And what counts above all is the inherently conflictual nature of this painterly 'un-ground', the way in which its activation of forces makes it possible to imagine contemporary painting wrought free from the deadlock of eternal self-reflexivity, to think painting very precisely as a practice of hallucinating social relations in the making. Maybe this does not make for the very nicest art around. But it may go some way towards explaining the enduring fascination of an artistic project more difficult than most.

10 See Nicola Field, *Over the Rainbow. Money, Class and Homophobia*, London: Pluto Press, 1995, pp.37–73.

11 See Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', *October*, vol.43, Winter 1987, pp.197–222.



GHOST OF THE PAST

GHOST OF THE PRESENT

IT'S A MATTER OF TRUTH

INITIATION OF THE BROTHERHOOD OF JOEY STEFANO

CRUSADE OF THE REBIRTH

DOOMED

CHURCH OF JOEY STEFANO

WHITE MINIMALISM

IF YOU CAN'T LIVE YOU CAN'T DIE

SEARCH OF SPLENDOR INSTEAD OF APPETITE

GHOST OF THE PAST

THE WORLD IS TO DESTROY ALL MANKIND

Church of Joey Stefano

ONELL

I MISS SOMEONE TO MISS

YES I AM GRIEVING I AM MOURNING

MY PAIN IS DEDICATED TO JOEY

THE BROTHERHOOD OF JOEY STEFANO

PRESENT

RECEIVED

DATE



Some colleagues of mine were recently denounced as ‘Antwerp formalists’ by a theorist we – that is, myself and these so-called Antwerp formalists – all adore and respect. She could not accept our nuanced approach to documenta 12. She wanted the show to be torn apart, dismissed, brutally discarded. The vehemence of her stance expressed an ongoing commitment to the previous documenta, a project that opened up a new space for analysing art within a substantial – one could even say constitutional – relation to the political.

Is this confrontation the only way in which we are to imagine the relationship between documenta 11 and documenta 12? Do we really have to surrender the conceptual gains made by documenta 11 in order to truly engage with documenta 12? Documenta 11’s curator Okwui Enwezor built his argument through the ‘thematizing’ of politics by means of a multitude of political inroads in the preparative debates, in his curatorial approach and in the exhibition proper. Indeed, the most recent documenta brushed all of this aside and played itself out on a much lighter ground, creating a buzz around three contemporary intellectual topics (the discursive results of which were almost invisible in the actual exhibition), and assembling an exhibition that could be called ‘extended neoclassical’ – extended since it included socially and politically engaged works, which art fairs also do these days.¹ If there were any curatorial politics involved here, they were not-so-expertly hidden under the veil of presenting art-as-such, blotting out the contours of the various artists’ biographies.² Does this mean, however, that the core of Enwezor’s documenta 11 project should be considered *in absentia* while critically approaching its successor? Isn’t there a possibility here to further the potential that was gained five years ago in the considerations of its successor, no matter how light-handed and light-headed its proposals may have been – indeed, no matter how *sfumato*, sometimes even fuzzy?

‘Formalism’ seems to be the original sin of documenta 12: it even contaminates those who dare consider it. But a term never comes alone; terms come (and go) in monogamous pairs. When using the f*** word, its old complement and antithesis re-emerges – the question of content. It is what attracts us in art beyond form. It may take on many different shapes and guises, ranging from the taste of Zeuxis’s grapes in the famous Greek pictorial contest to the terms of social and/or political engagement during the decade of documenta 11.

Two sides, then. Which of these two sides of the moon is the enlightened one? Neither of the two, obviously; they are both dark. This is also how we could best define the attitude of documenta 12, an exhibition that did not seek or ‘mean’ to polemicise or polarise, but in some sense begged to be widened, enriched, to be made more inclusive. Coming at the moment it did, it should not be thought of as a merely formalist exercise (that, in any case, would mean a great loss indeed); instead, it may result in the posing of questions concerning the potential relationships between the formal possibilities of art on the one hand, and the problems in society at large on the other. Rather than a specific

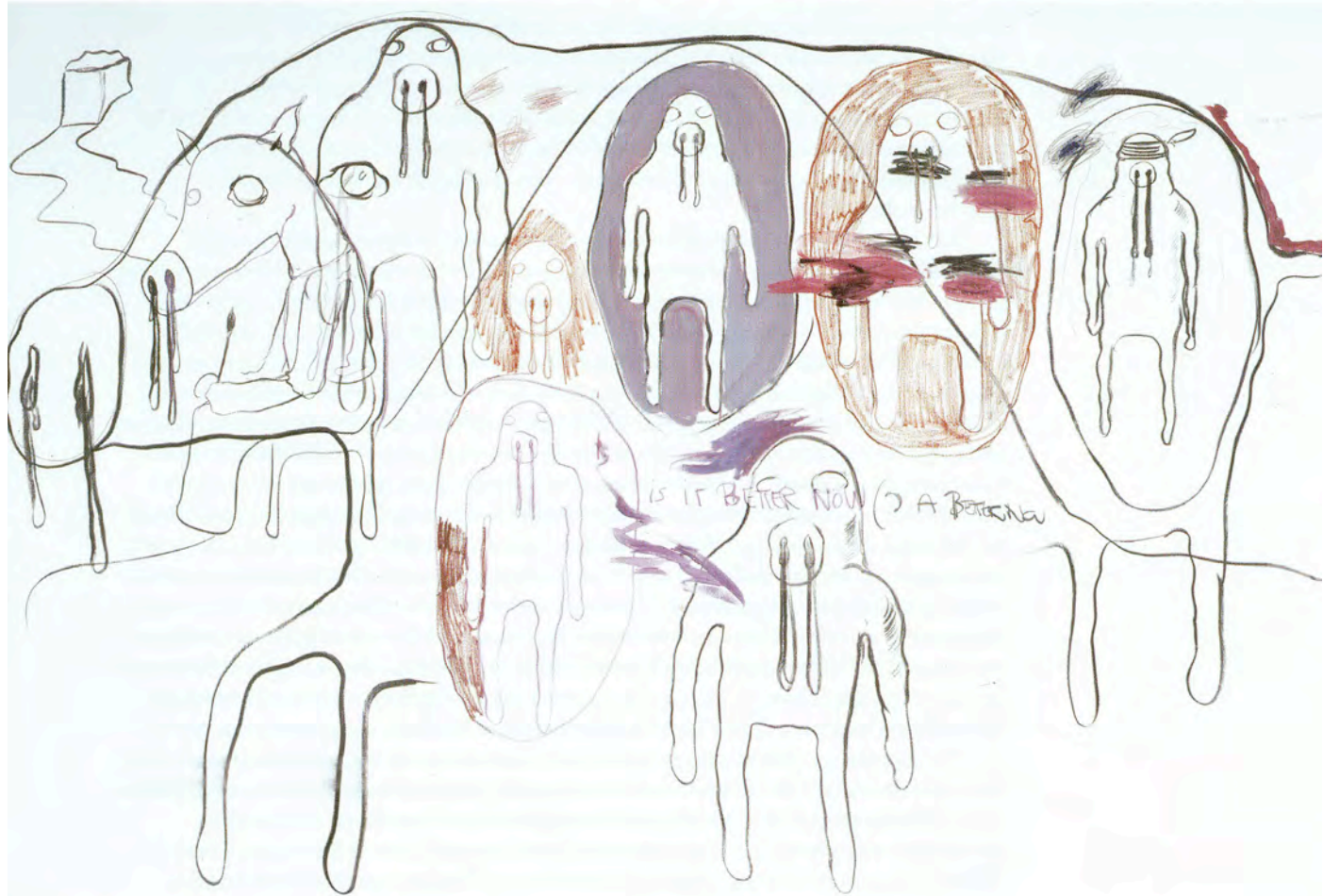
1 The themes, or leitmotifs, were ‘Is modernity our antiquity?’, ‘What is bare life?’ and ‘What is to be done?’. The formulations of the themes changed slightly throughout the period of preparation of the exhibition. Their definition also remained open.

2 For example, the biographies of a number of deceased artists who happened to be female and not completely canonised, were not made available even though their being female and not completely canonised seemed part of the reasons for their inclusion.

quality of the exhibition proper, this ‘posing of questions’ is a generic possibility implied in the kind of project documenta 12 really was (and, I believe, wanted to be), the more so at the moment it announced itself. And it is a challenging possibility nonetheless, in the epoch defined by Enwezor’s documenta.

As the *sfumato* approach of documenta 12 seemed to suggest, then, there are no compelling reasons to follow up on its particular choice of artists. As a project, it could just as well be ‘recharged’ with artists who were not part of this initial selection. It seems possible, for example, to inject it with a shot of Bjarne Melgaard.

Melgaard is an artist whose work can be validated along very classical lines of judgement. He originally is a painter. Even though he became known primarily for the grey-and-black works that he produced after the largest part of his oeuvre went up in flames during a fire in his studio on New Year’s Eve in 2000, he is one of those rare contemporary painters who, in a rather old-fashioned sense, could be characterised as a colourist. The whole of Melgaard’s oeuvre can be approached and assessed in terms



of atmospheric fields and retinal intensities, considering all the other articulations as a mere support for this focus. His works from the 1990s – such as the magnificent paintings that were presented in his solo exhibition ‘Everything American Is Evil, The Return to Constantinople’ at Kiasma in Helsinki in 1998 – often breathe and bathe in light colours which establish fields of attention through consciously balanced tonalities.³ Because of their outgoing vividness, one is tempted to speak about these tonalities in terms of primary colours – blue, yellow or red. Yet they are cultivated and ultra-specific floating hues. Only their degrees of deviation from primary colours lead to a focus – into yellow, blue or white.

Similarly, Melgaard’s work can be approached in terms of its linear qualities. His early installations articulated those qualities by using woollen threads that

Untitled, 2006, oil on canvas, 200 × 300cm.
Photograph by Roman Maerz

3 Bjarne Melgaard, ‘Everything American Is Evil, The Return to Constantinople’, 20 November 1998 – 17 January 1999, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki.

linked together different materials from divergent origins into a web of relationships. A draughtsman, then. A great deal of Melgaard's output has consisted of drawings indeed, works in which whole hoards of informal gestures team up around figurative proposals. Part of the virtuosity in his more recent paintings is based on drawing too: the sketchy emergence, through curt brushstrokes, of recognisable shapes, heads and limbs. Sometimes Melgaard will decide to simply enjoy drawing lines, like he did for his exhibition at Stella Lohaus Gallery in Antwerp in 2005.⁴ Beside a series of etchings one came across five cashmere wall carpets filled with images whose content can only be described as raw, even if they appear to display light and elegant designs held together by a minimum number of crafty lines. The technique used in these works at first seemed to be that of delicate pastel lines on dark surfaces; after attentive analysis they prove to be woven into a special fabric of an uncanny quality.

Textiles, yes, and from this tactile realm of textiles we seamlessly arrive in a domain which – in the occidental tradition, at least – is that of the formal radicalised



Untitled, 2006, oil on canvas, 200 × 300cm.

Photograph by Roman Maerz

into formalism: in one word, that of design. It is no mere detail that the space which housed Melgaard's new paintings in last year's Athens biennial was outfitted with stylish sofas, covered with fabrics designed by Melgaard himself. Lifestyle and fashion are anything but alien to him.

Yet this is also the artist who has consistently experienced problems with the explicit articulations of his content matter. His works, virtually all of them, are indeed shocking, the content ranging from cocaine orgies to rape fantasies and doomsday visions of dogs being thrown out of windows. Light touches are combined with harsh content, as in the blazers he made in light grey wool in 1999 – 'a Queen of Peking * Brad.B. * Melgaard production' – that joyfully exclaim to be '100 % mega dope', or, on the back, state 'All Gym Queens Deserve To Die', prime examples, no doubt, of perfect post-fitness leisure.

4 Bjarne Melgaard, 'Not a Painting Show', 1 December 2005–21 January 2006, Stella Lohaus Gallery, Antwerp.





*Untitled, 2007, oil on
canvas, 200 × 300cm*

We do know that a contemporary ‘content’ approach brings out pertinent relations to the problems in society at large. As such, this stance may help to increase our attention, both for the vastness of the issues at stake and for the specificity of the artistic proposal. It may even stir up that rarest of phenomena – true debate, discussion. On exceptional occasions, the ripples caused by this approach move beyond the free flow of meaning, and manage to touch a public nerve, even cause a public scandal. Melgaard was one of the rare artists to recently achieve this effect in Germany. At MARTa, in the small German town of Herford, his sombre exhibition ‘Black Low: The Punk Movement Was Just Hippies With Short Hair’ (2002) was deemed obscene, and closed down by the local authorities. An artist’s book by Melgaard from the same year consists of an appropriation of *Lords of Chaos. The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998), a book co-authored by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Søderlind. A copy of this journalistic quest to understand the vitality and violence of the Norwegian Black Metal scene of the 1990s was simply signed by Melgaard, who scrawled his signature in

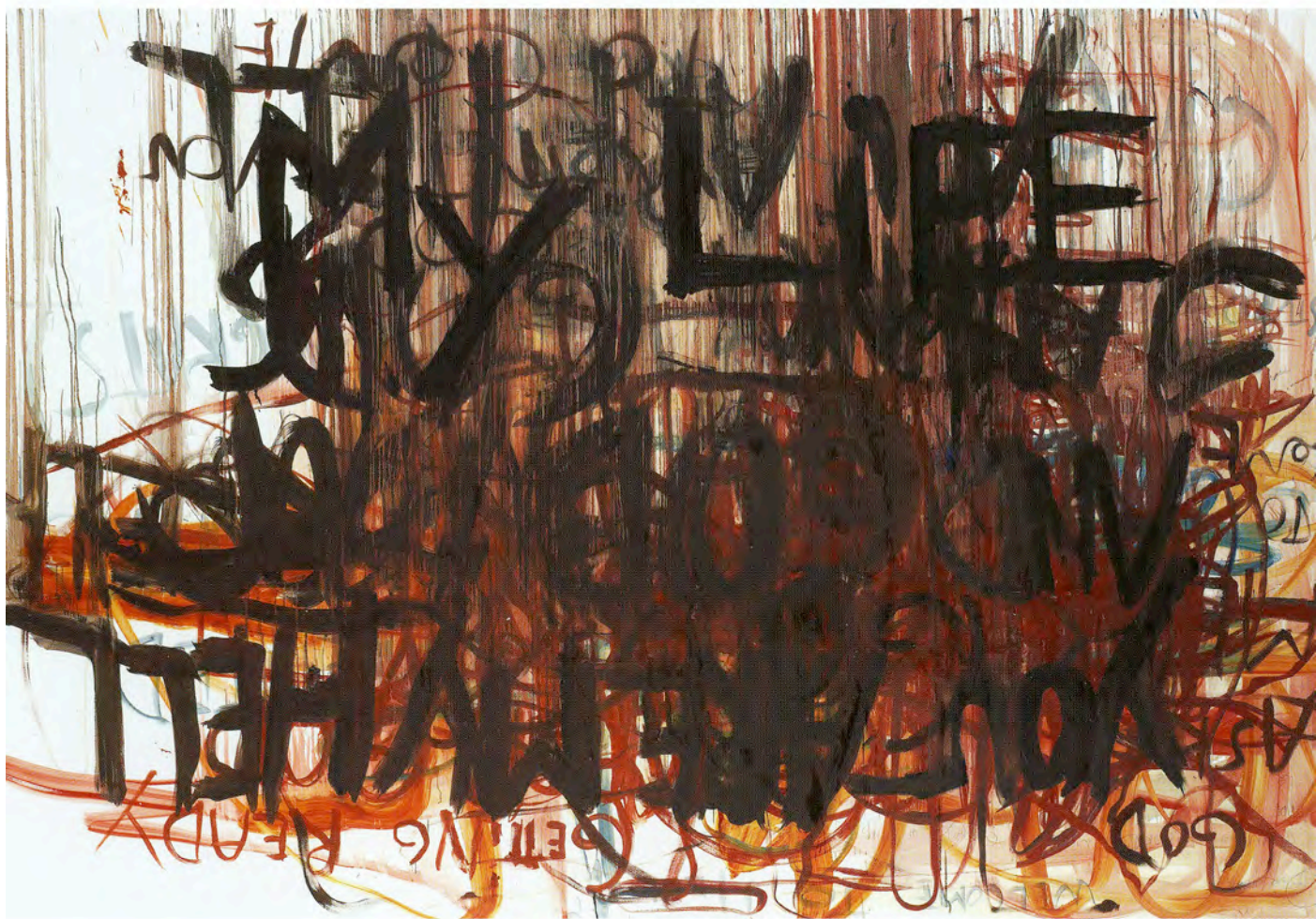


Untitled, 2005, oil on canvas, 200 × 300cm

black marker on the cover – in the sky, above the image of a burning medieval church. Nothing that Melgaard hints at, expresses or describes in his art can be thought of as more violent than the real-life story that is captured by this cover image (an actually burning church), which he just barely touched. Why is it, then, that Moynihan’s and Søderlind’s book was not banned, while Melgaard’s exhibition was transformed into a scene of symbolic political closure? Is it simply that the museum space is more ‘loaded’, or that artists are more respected than writers, and that their ‘coverage’ of certain stories inflicts more pain? That hardly seems conceivable, no matter how strong we may think the bourgeois afterglow of German art life is. Nothing is weightier than the sphere of the media – printed matter’s influence is tantamount to that of museums. There must be some strange twist here which lured authority into overplaying its hand, into losing its mind in being horrified by these simple, slightly old-fashioned products of a person’s hands and mind, artworks that were slightly over-expressive in their appearance.

What happens when Melgaard signs up for Lords of Chaos? Let us look at another artist's book of his, one that is five years older – from 1997. This one is a hardback. Its fine cloth surface is of an uncanny tactility, light purple with gold relief print, depicting a sun setting – or rising – over a sea, nine rays emanating from it, and with the sentence 'Paul Gauguin is eternity by Bjarne Melgaard' completing the image. Inside, it consists of just fresh and light white quality paper. However, this radiant report of Melgaard's voyage to Gauguin's grave on the Îles Marquises in French Polynesia is all but empty. It is filled to the brim with the same substance as Melgaard's version of *Lords of Chaos*; it is filled with attention.

Here, one can make slightly more factual remarks. One may say, for instance, that Melgaard uses his signifiers in a poetic way – that he isolates them and highlights them, that he lets them shine like stars on their own. The original meanings of these signifiers obviously continue to resonate within such a set-up: if a chihuahua enters the scene, the chihuahua is there indeed, as you can see in some of the works. You can



Untitled, 2005, oil on canvas, 200 × 300cm

see your chihuahua, any given friend of yours can see his or her chihuahua (his or her view might be more vague and tentative than yours). But each of us actually has a floating chihuahua before us when looking at Melgaard's work. The many presences in his art, be they invented or historically traceable, may well be filled with your knowledge, your suspicions and your phantasmagorias alike. But at the same time they squarely deny any identification with these suspicions and phantasmagorias. Their overt clarity is that of Lewis Carroll's white hare running around in Alice's Wonderland: it is a type of clarity that no longer is secure of its own setting, one that defies its narrative even as it is writing it. This 'chihuahua space' is populated with presences that may take on very different forms and emerge, for some time, out of very different thematic strands before fading out again. Yet every one of them to a certain degree is interchangeable – they serve as mere representations of a deeper notion of presence; they are its ambassadors.

Melgaard chooses strong and robust characters for this business of ‘representing’ – valiant knights who can defend presenthood against all odds, natures so unlikely that one cannot pass them by, moments in which one can truly ‘believe’, which surpass the conventional, comforting formalities, and which reach out beyond the cosy spaces of art. Melgaard allows this fireworks of surface effects to reach a dazzling, disturbing climax (and then some – his art really only begins beyond this climax), but at the same time also allows these effects to find a very delicately balanced mode of behaviour. In the Athens biennial installation, the textiles that decorated Melgaard’s salon performed this feat of balancing; they were the installation’s main actors instead of the paintings on the wall, huge surfaces full of brio and monuments of momentary performativity. The images spread out on the sofa surfaces, on the contrary, were delicate, precise and repeated. They offered a network of relationships with the colour fields that surrounded them, attempting to bring in a homoeopathically engendered possibility of meaning in that specific realm of art that is called ‘design’, the temple of the true priesthood that rules this formalism-obsessed epoch of ours.

Be it in a design space, be it in an aesthetic heaven such as those he pictorially recalls, or be it in the sombre sonority of black metal music, Melgaard consistently invokes the possibility of the meaningful. None of the anecdotes, characteristics or noble deeds really makes a difference – being an intensity is their birth right. Their ultimate quality is that of being a possible topic of (and for) belief. As such, they do not fight on account of some characterising detail or other. They are always ready to morph, to lose ears and gain eyes, to transform themselves into an other, if need be.

Petty politics, if any, but certainly an oeuvre that can be related to the political: always taking a stance, over and over again, relating itself to the uncertainty of the setting in which the work would surely dissolve if it wasn’t for its signifying conviction, and ready, even poised, nay, busy to turn itself into something else – the next presence needed in the next moment of concentration and co-existence.

It is the openness of these presences that is their most pertinent attitude: their emphatic declaration, not of being what they are, but of sheer potentiality, of potentially accepting another proposal, a re-mediation, a reversal, a complete shift from darkness into light, from blue into gold. The figurations of Melgaard are therefore never caricatures; they are living creatures, never aspiring for mere maintenance, but for a future instead. Such spacey evocations of sex-here-drugs-there-and-black-metal-at-yet-another-place can be horrifying indeed. The German authorities were undoubtedly right to intervene in ‘Black Low’. If Melgaard’s posse truly is a frightening bunch, it isn’t because of the monsters as they appear in it, but instead because they are truly and literally monstrous, i.e. they do not fit inside any categories, even when they seem to be offering up all the elements needed to be described and analysed for the sake of categorising. If they do not convincingly fit, it is because they are ready to and in need of change. As beings and becomings that are embedded in a context of uncertain relations, they may soon prove to be something else, some-body gruesomely unpredictable: even from within the chihuahua fear may shine forth.