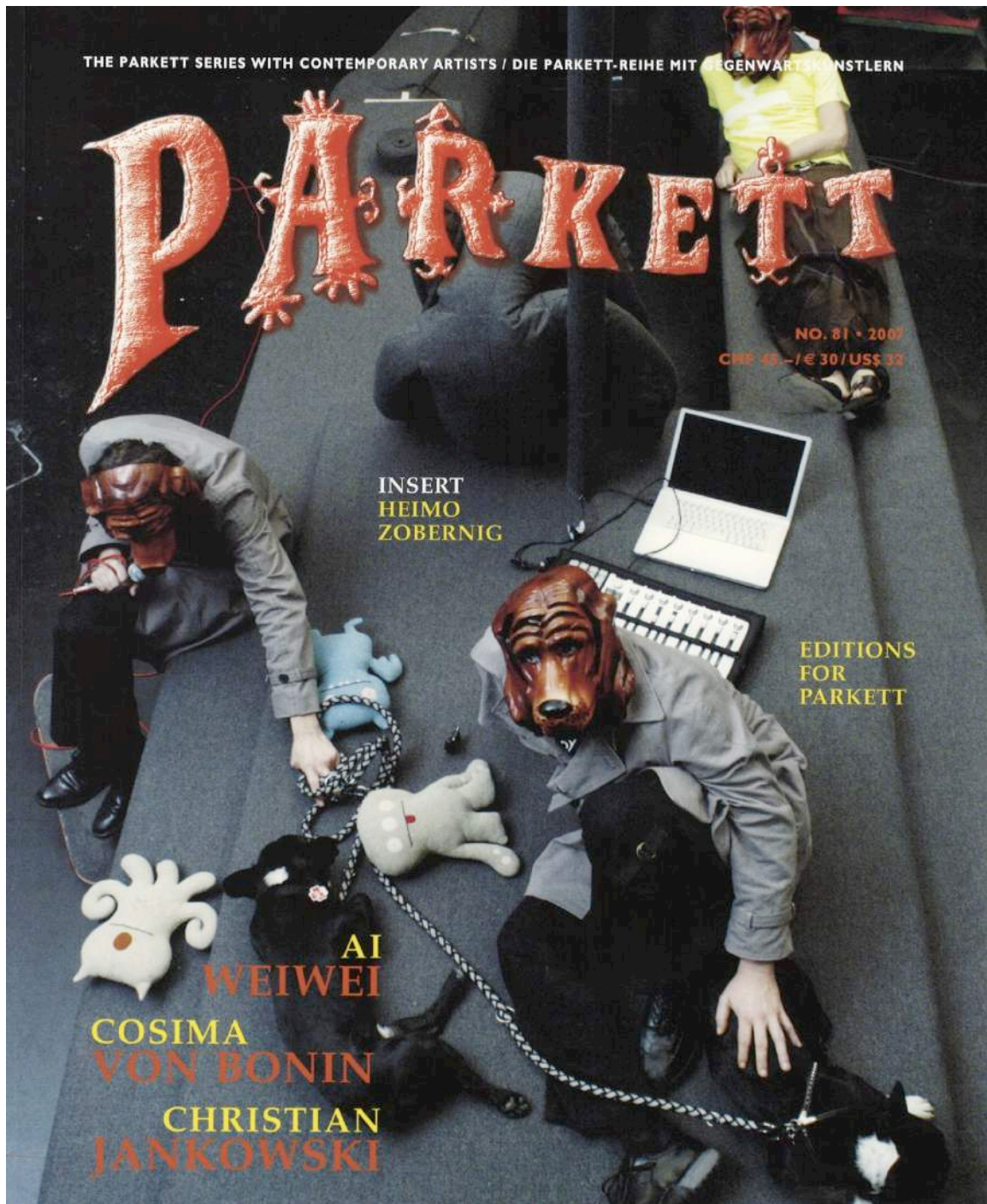


Petzel

Christian Scheidemann, "The Original and its Digestion," *Parkett* 81, 2007, pp. 21-24.



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Keith Edmier

THE ORIGINAL AND ITS DIGESTION

CHRISTIAN SCHEIDEMANN



The increasing use of non-traditional materials and production techniques in contemporary art means that a restorer often has to be consulted before the work has even been created. As a rule, this is in order to examine the new materials and determine their long-term resilience, or to preserve perishable substances such as foodstuffs and dyes. Art's universal claim to be enduring frequently conflicts with the natural ageing process of the materials from which the works themselves are made. The challenge lies

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not only in creating a perfect object that will not change, or will change only very slightly over time, but also in guarding against future complaints from collectors about the ageing of their works. On the other hand, some artists deliberately design works that are subject to gradual decay, in the spirit of a *vanitas*. In such cases, the restorer has to ensure that the process of decay can actually occur, for to prevent it would be tantamount to destroying the work itself. Yet even so, for a restorer to be approached by an artist like Keith Edmier to find out which species of worm or termite will be able to destroy his new pictures and sculptures fastest and transform them into digested remains is highly unusual and poses new challenges.

Today, there is a whole new generation of artists exploring ways of shaping, copying or painstakingly reconstructing everyday things or body parts. Unlike the traditional academic exercise of copying, such reconstruction is not aimed at imitating what exists, but at the process of transformation as such.

In casting a shape that the artist has found or made, what is created is not a copy but a new original, whereby the choice of material is of crucial importance. The statement made by a sculpture varies substantially depending on whether it is made of marble or soap, and whether the material used for

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the cast of a self portrait is chocolate, gunpowder or the artist's own blood, collected over several weeks.

The artist Keith Edmier, based in New York, has proven to be a master of transforming the complex, organic forms found in nature. In a recent interview with Matthew Barney, he speaks of the integrity of the object. "When I cast, it's really important that the cast maintain the original form or its integrity, but I very rarely feel the need to take it to the level of mimicking something directly."¹

In *VICTORIA REGIA (FIRST NIGHT BLOOM)* and *VICTORIA REGIA (SECOND NIGHT BLOOM)*, both 1998, Edmier uses resin, polyurethane, acrylic, and silicone to create a monumental sculpture of a water lily. The piece, which was cast in Oregon, takes the dichogamous form of a hermaphroditic organism, appearing as a female blossom on the first night and as a male blossom on the second night, fertilized by the chance transfer of pollen by beetles in search of food. The artist sees autobiographical parallels in the portrayal of male and female gender roles, reflecting his own childhood in his parental home.

In an early self-portrait, a sculpture entitled *BEVERLY EDMIER 1967* (1998), the artist's mother is shown seated and inclining slightly forwards, contemplating her translucent pregnant belly in which the fetus of the artist can just barely be recognized.

The whole figure is cast in transparent, red polyurethane and polyester resin, evoking bloody body tissue. For the suit worn by his mother, Edmier had a copy specially woven and tailored of the pink Chanel suit that Jacqueline Kennedy was wearing on the day of the president's assassination. Instead of the designer's logo, the silver buttons on the suit bear the official Presidential Seal, an act that is technically illegal. Edmier gained access to the seal through a friend, whose grandfather was the famous Cincinnati Reds baseball player Edd Roush. He had found it embossed on a certificate presented to the Hall of Famer by President Nixon.

In Edmier's most ambitious project to date, *BREMEN TOWNE* (2007), a mini-retrospective on view at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies in 2007, the combination of casting and reconstructing is further developed but with far more subtlety. Having searched in vain for a suitable house similar to his parental home in Bremen Towne, a district of Tinley Park in south-west Chicago, he decided last year to have the ground floor of the house reconstructed on a scale of 1:1. With the aid of a few faded Polaroids and Kodak Instamatic shots from his childhood, and from memory, he set to work recreating the interior—family room, living room, dining room and kitchen—down to the last detail, and, in the



KEITH EDMIER, *BREMEN TOWNE*, 2007, family photograph;
kitchen floor / Familienphoto; Küchenboden.



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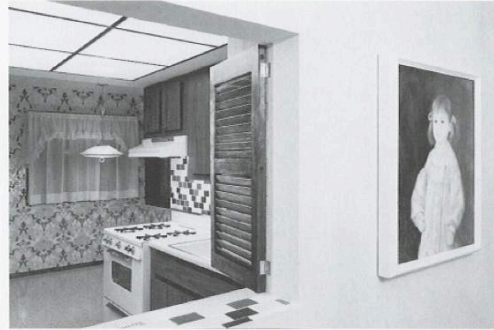
process, reliving emotions and experiences of 1971 when he was just four years old.

The kitchen is the heart of the three-bed room ranch-style house and the centerpiece of the Bard retrospective. The artist found images welling up of little Keith clambering over a chair in the morning to reach the Formica counter and taking a pack of puffed rice cereal from the cupboard, of sitting on the counter eating his cereal, gazing at the vinyl tiles with their pebbled pattern, and feeling like a construction worker. Since these cream and grey vinyl and asbestos tiles with their splashes of color and deeply engraved oval pebblestone imitations are no longer produced today, Edmier had to find a company willing to reproduce this natural stone imitation that was so popular in the seventies. The oval indentations were etched by a computer-controlled laser cutter, while the warm-hued coating of the tiles (as he remembers it) was reinvented with vinyl dyes.

Like the tiles, every other detail of his parent's kitchen and their furnishings had to be researched, reconstructed, and recreated. The backsplash tiles for the kitchen wall were custom made in Las Vegas on the basis of vintage samples. Edmier found the two-door Amana 25 refrigerator in a film prop store in Burbank, Los Angeles, and had it painstakingly restored by his friend, the artist Bob Wyzocki (who incidentally plays the role of Jim Otto in Matthew Barney's early work). The door handles had to be re-chromed using an electroplating technique, while the harvest gold finish was reapplied in a professional paint workshop.

The process of recreation and reconstruction makes each and every part of this installation a work of art, a sculpture, in which consumer goods become originals. We are unavoidably reminded of Duchamp's readymades and of the problem he faced when Arturo Schwarz influenced him to create editions of his earlier works, years after the originals had been made in factories. This meant resorting to traditional artisanal techniques to reconstruct previously mass-produced consumer goods.

Edmier grew up in a house furnished, for the most part, with items ordered from the JC Penney and Sears catalogues. Even the house itself was purchased from a catalogue. And so his first step was to



KEITH EDMIER, BREMEN TOWNE, 2007, kitchen / Küche.

use eBay to track down the actual department store catalogues from the years between 1970 and 1977. In them, Edmier found illustrations of the carpet in his parents' house, the pinch-pleated Jacquard curtains in the living room and the gold wallpaper with its black, flocked stripes. Childhood photographs taken on special occasions—birthdays, Christmas, visits from relatives—helped him check the details of the interior and refresh his memory.

Needless to say, in the last forty years, products and tastes have changed considerably. And so it proved impossible to find many of the materials that were so popular at the time. Edmier created a topographical model of the sculptured loop shag carpet, and worked with commercial designers and mills to weave a new carpet according to his instructions. He was able to make a drawing of the psychedelic wallpaper in the kitchen, which he then processed in Photoshop and Illustrator and had reproduced as a silkscreen. Even the lamps were reconstructed using individual vintage parts and new imitations. Casts were made and then assembled of individual components of a green and blue *Rock Lamp* made of large, colored lumps of polyurethane.

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KEITH EDMIER, BEVERLY EDMIER, 1998,
translucent polyurethane, polyester resin, suit /
transluzides Polyurethan, Polyester-Kunstharz, Kleid.

In his interview with Matthew Barney, Edmier remarks, "I feel like this project also has aspects that you have to take my word for, that I went through the process at that level, because I feel like it would be a cheat just to use found objects or readymades and not transform them or remake them in some way. I have to process them. They have to go through that abstraction. It's not really about illustrating that transformation or showing it. It just kind of happened, somehow, through the process of creating it. For certain objects I'm making, it's the memory of the thing. For example, the lamp is obviously not an exact thing. I have limited photographic source material for it. But everything about it needed to feel right to me. That's something I'm dealing with a lot, with this stuff."²⁾

Although his parents had moved out and Edmier hadn't set foot in the house in sixteen years, the study of old photographs enabled him to identify

some of the pictures that had hung on the walls. One, a zebra picture, signed "Ortega," painted on zebra-striped velvet, recalls the Jungle Room in Elvis Presley's Graceland. Edmier also sent a wood-effect, plaster-cast sculpture of a medieval monk to Oberammergau, Germany to be re-carved at four times its original size. In addition, he had the monk's face replaced with a CNC-generated portrait of his father.

Edmier's earliest encounters with art were through a clown painting made by a friend of his father's and given as a gift to mark the birth of his son, and through some posters of major works, which his father had purchased at the Art Institute of Chicago and had framed: Picasso's *MAN WITH PIPE* (1915), Dalí's *INVENTION OF THE MONSTERS* (1937), and Renoir's *CHILD IN WHITE* (1883). For Edmier, as a child, there was no question of whether these were originals or reproductions. To him, they were simply "their Picasso, their Dalí, their Renoir." It wasn't until a later visit one day to the Art Institute of Chicago with his father that Edmier encountered the same pictures that were hanging in his home, and realized, for the first time, that there was such a thing as an original.

For BREMEN TOWNE Edmier hired an artist to copy every single picture in his parents' house in oil on canvas. He even sent her to Chicago to study the originals *in situ*. At first he had intended to let the paintings be eaten gradually by termites and other pests to accelerate the process of ageing, but after some searching and a series of unsuccessful experiments, he failed to find any species that would gnaw away at the canvas, the oil paint, the priming chalk, and the wooden stretchers all at once.

In this installation, memory was not only triggered through the browsing of catalogues and childhood photographs. The reconstructed interior of the Edmier home brought the entire family back into the picture, making Edmier's childhood days a reality again. Only this time, it wasn't the parents who were calling the shots, but their son.

(Translation: Ishbel Flett)

1) "Matthew Barney talks to Keith Edmier" in *Keith Edmier 1991* (London, Edward Booth-Clibborn, 2007).

2) *Ibid.*, p. 162.