LIKE ZOMBIES IN A MUSEUM

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1 What is the Use of Appropriation?

At this particular time, we are witnessing a sweeping movement involving the re-interpretation of Appropriation. Ushered in a decade or so ago, it has not only made it possible to cast a new eye on a generation of artists whose work had been as if vitrified in the (overly) brilliant content matter of the writings of Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens. It has also functioned like a huge machine for re-thinking the technique of appropriation itself, and with it the economy of contemporary culture. One of the observations shared by all its new analysts is that this technique—which people first associated solely with the work of a generation of American artists—in fact encompasses all periods, all cultural activities, and all spheres of production, from the art world to the fashion industry, by way of Hollywood. Starting from here, nothing, on the face of it, guarantees the critical function with which its earliest theoreticians had entrusted it. Appropriation has even become the object of a theoretical suspicion, and the terms of the accusation are many and varied. Sven Lüticken, for example, associates it with a form of taming economic chance. In *Planet of the Remakes,* he is concerned with the expanding practice of the remake and the sequel by film studios, actually noting that “in all instances, studios (a somewhat nostalgic word for describing the film branches of multimedia conglomerates) prefer to bet on something that has already been successful than invest in something posing the slightest risk”, adding that “on the whole, Hollywood prefers recycling a ready-made content than producing a film d’auteur”. By implicitly contrasting two production methods, combination (or appropriation) which consists in “recycling a ready-made content”, and innovation (or invention), Lüticken shows that appropriation is a strategy of economic rationalization, making it possible to reduce the risks of an investment. What is involved is a generalized production technique in the culture industries, he explains furthermore in *Appropriation Mythology.* Why should we grant it the slightest critical value?
Taking another example, the artist Willem de Rooij has lamented the fact that, with many artists, the use of explicit references is made to the detriment of formal invention: “I am stunned by the flood of artworks”, he writes, “that I have recently seen, and which consists of a photograph of a book that the artist finds interesting. Or a book in a display case. Or sculptures consisting of a shelf affixed to a wall, holding a certain number of books. Or a photo of a shelf. Or the photograph of a book in a display case. These books may be interesting, but the photos and the sculptures usually are not. I find it unjust for art that the form of a work should be ignored to this extent”.3 It is always possible to interpret this book mode either as the sign of a fetishism underwritten nowadays by certain artists for the book-object at the moment of its possible disappearance, or as the clue to the (reciprocal) fascination between book culture and visual culture. But what de Rooij here identifies, with a dash of satire, is that new “orthodoxy of reference”4 which can be found at every level of the art world: in galleries, in studios, in museums, in schools, in magazines, people are name-dropping as if there is no tomorrow. At the historical moment of appropriation, quotation had attained a tactical function: it was a matter of smithereening the values of originality, and the mythology of the auteur. Through a curious reversal of fate (which we might call “massification”), the argument of authority was reinstated as the flavour of the day by the very things that had wanted to do away with it. So, today, appropriation acts as a guarantee for lazy and conformist practices, which, for better or for worse, speculate on more recognized artistic values, and try to turn the cultural course list into a work, in order to please teachers and critics, and reassure the markets.

Among the analysts of this referential proliferation, which is a sign of our economic times, let us once again mention Simon Reynolds’s Retromania. In it, starting from the history of fashion, art, and design, but above all music, the music critic analyzes our culture’s ever more marked tendency to recycle its immediate past, and worries about the possibility of a cultural collapse, in which we would see “the archives of pop drying up”.6 In an especially persuasive way, he also predicts a “cultural and ecological collapse”,7 the weight of which, that we are experiencing in the face of the accumulation of the cultural past, is merely a harbinger.
Mathis Gasser works very frequently with appropriated images. For his painting, he borrows from book covers, details of famous pictures, images taken from films and TV shows, posters and advertisements, and draws very broadly from the history of art and visual culture. In his very plentiful 2012 output alone, we find appropriations from Francis Picabia, Alexander Rodchenko, Winston Churchill, Fernand Léger, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Willi Baumeister, Paul Colin, Ren Yi, Atsuko Tanaka, Auguste Herbin, Chip Kidd, Tom Eckersley, and Oskar Schlemmer, with visual references to Philip K. Dick, Günther Anders, Michael Schetsche, Peter Szendy, and William Gibson. And over and over again Gasser quotes Robert Musil, an intellectual and artistic figure to whom he is forever reverting. So his work is hallmarked by an impressive density of quotations, as well as by a wide range of different appropriation gestures, from quotation to what we might call re-painting (the way we talk about “re-photographing” in relation to Prince and Levine).

Much marked by reading many different books and essays above-mentioned, I recently started projecting some of these theories onto everything I look at, in an undoubtedly excessive manner. So as I started to write this essay, I had this formula firmly implanted in my head and, as a result, a perfectly defined idea about what I wanted to develop in relation to this work. Drawing on some of his most abstract and science-fiction paintings (and thoroughly preoccupied by the future of culture), I wanted to argue that his images of catastrophes could be seen as allegories to do with the status of appropriation in today’s culture, and that they were the formalization of a disaster in the offing. By turning Mathis Gasser into a critic of all those practices which only rely on references to make themselves legitimate, I thus found it relevant, on the basis of this very reference-rich work, to raise certain questions like: “Should we be preparing ourselves for an artistic apocalypse?”, and: “ Might appropriated materials, like proliferating algae absorbing all the oxygen in the ocean depths, be endangering the fragile cultural ecosystem which permits novelty to appear?”, and : “Is art history a fossil energy from which we are endlessly drawing, but which we are never renewing? If so, what is going to happen when we have totally depleted the cultural reserves?”

I am convinced that these questions are crucial (even if the analogy is a bit laboured). But the object of Gasser’s work—with its undoubted wealth of references—is
not to answer them (they are my questions, not his). If the truth be told, he only deals with appropriation insomuch as he makes use of it: what is involved, for him, is a means of invention, not a subject. What is more, many different parameters govern his choice to appropriate an image. He brings up the advertising or graphic quality of the image, its closeness to images already produced, and its capacity to bring forth new forms of thought. It may also be a matter, for the artist, of learning something from the image, safeguarding it for the future, thinking about images which have a subjective bearing for him, and drawing, on the contrary, from a common cultural and visual store. So things become unusually complicated. And it becomes important to make distinctions: impossible (or unproductive) to talk about appropriation-in-general, so sophisticated and thought-out is the politics of the reference developed by the artist. With Gasser, we become gradually removed from reality, and delve into the levels of reference the way the characters of *Inception* plunge into the levels of dreams. The descent into the world of culture is a dive down into a “secret, profound and subconscious level”, which calls to mind some of David Lynch’s films, or the art of Robert Gober and Cindy Sherman—works which explore a collective (American) unconscious.

### 3 A network of paintings

When I visited *Amor Vacui, Horror vacui*, the wonderful retrospective of John Armleder’s work held at the Mamco in 2006, I remember having the feeling that I was visiting a group show. As if by accident, that impression echoed a story that the godfather of the Swiss scene fondly repeats: going into an exhibition and not recognizing one of his works, i.e. becoming a stranger to his own oeuvre. That stylistic explosion gave me the feeling of an enigma to be solved, a need to understand what, over and above the identity of the person producing them, could really hold together those great mineral streaks, those optical fantasies, those Christmas décors, those neon sculptures, and those neo-modernist canvases (not counting the *Furniture Sculptures* which, it just so happens, are based on this principle of forced association). I have long experienced the same feeling in front of Mathis Gasser’s oeuvre, with regard to the explosion of his work, which is not stylistic but iconographic (his way of painting does not vary, unlike John Armleder’s). It takes time to successfully unravel the apparent chaos represented by the
accumulation of his pictures (in 2012, incidentally, Gasser repainted Voilà la femme by Picabia, that champion of artistic heterogeneity).

Musil’s The Man without Qualities, Gasser’s most significant reference, definitely introduces an initial avenue of understanding, insomuch as the novel “talks constantly about networks of thoughts and images”11 (it is, moreover, very interesting that a novel can be used by him as a theoretical reference). David Joselit’s essay Painting Beside Itself constructs another one, for it raises the particularly interesting question: “How can a painting belong to a network?”12

Gasser actually abandons the exploration of the image as an entity, in favour of a quest focusing on its potential, which is to say its ability to incorporate a discourse floating above it—an operation that can be achieved in differing ways. Once transposed to the artist’s work, Joselit’s question thus becomes: How can a painting be incorporated in a discourse? One of the possibilities of this incorporation consists in the writing of a script, something which Gasser has done with In the Museum (2011), a video in which Christopher Walken (his puppet) strolls around an exhibition in a venue calling to mind the great American museums (the principle of the “exhibition as film”13 is here quite literal). The show, a strange mixture of 20th century masterpieces and very personal choices like Evidence by Mike Mandel, and Larry Sultan, becomes the setting for an attack by zombies. Walken duly tries to defend himself.

The sole object of immanence, incidentally, of In the Museum is not a film. This project will soon have a sequel, and it includes para-operal material (the way we talk of “para-textual”14) which announces the film (posters) or winds it up (paintings of credits, making the spectator acquainted with all the references present in the film, distinguished in accordance with their level of explicitness).

The organization of his paintings in a project which subsumes them is actually a constant factor in Gasser’s work. He works in the form of series which become extended in time, like Heroes and Ghosts, and The Alien Project, which for the time being only exists thanks to the paintings announcing it, as well as several short films. As for those which do not belong to any form of identifiable project, they are worked by way of obsessive motifs, the recurrence of which clearly indicates their importance within the artist’s system. Some images of his work result, for example, from a revisited orientalism. The Man in the High Castle borrows the cover of the first edition of Philip K. Dick’s science fiction novel, published in 1962.15 Two signs share the image, the standard of the
imperial Japanese army on the left, and the Nazi swastika on the right. *Air Orient* borrows a poster by the poster designer Paul Colin, dated 1932. Here again, the image is constructed on an East/West contrast. *Images of China* uses the cover of a drawing book of William Alexander, an English painter and illustrator who worked for the British embassy in China. Others are based on science-fiction imagery, and in particular on representations of forms of extra-terrestrial life (or, more exactly, encounters with such life forms), or borrow book covers, functioning as “advertisements” for the books they represent.

Although each one of Gasser's paintings can be looked at independently, it can thus be re-situated in a broader discourse, and linked with all the others. He incidentally uses the term “superstructure” to describe these forms of discourse (*In the Museum*, a real exhibition filmed, also suggests that the artist will soon be adding the exhibition format to the list of these superstructures). In a meaningful way, he also uses this term to describe some of the forms he paints (as in the *Alien Superstructures*, and *Transeuropean Strcuture*). The fact is that these images are in fact constantly playing a double, or even a triple game. They quite literally represent their content (an advertisement, a book cover, a sci-fi film scene, an abstraction…). But they are also the signs making it possible to reconstruct a more all-encompassing discourse. Each work both constructs this discourse and perpetuates the memory of it; so each work is an extension of it. On a third (allegorical) level, some of the pieces function like the signs of the artist’s poetics (creation of superstructures/ integration of works specific to these structures): so they can be taken as classical poetic arts.

### 4 Alien or exotic

Once this heteronomy of the work has been posited, we can return to the question of its iconographic explosion, and try to explain more exactly what this all-encompassing discourse, in which the works are supposedly inserted, consists of. “For *In the Museum*, I was keen to create a new story ("the museum walk", Gasser recently explained, before adding, in relation to the videos of Melanie Gilligan and Nathaniel Mellors, two artists whose work he likes, that “they contain a lot of references, but create a narrative structure which adds something, and gives a direction.” If, for Gasser, the writing of a
script is “a means of inventing your own stories”\textsuperscript{19}, this is indeed because these superstructures make it possible to “weave references” into a narrative just as much as let a form of novelty emerge.

This dialectic of the given and the new, this \textit{Duel}, to borrow the title of one of Gasser’s paintings (based on an image from the Spielberg movie), is possible because of the choice of an invariably identical format (with Gilligan and Mellors it is the format of a TV show episode; with Gasser, the format of the canvas, 80 x 50 cm or 80 x 55 cm), and it crops up at every level in his work. It is from this angle, in particular, that we can interpret the recurrence of forms of orientalism mentioned above. Orientalism was the West’s aesthetic response to its confrontation with the foreign cultures of the East.\textsuperscript{20} It was less a matter of learning to get to know such cultures in a precise way than of formalizing their strangeness in a definitely understandable but partly invented form (usually based on an inversion of the known, i.e. the product of a very simple cognitive operation). The cohorts of aliens who fill the science-fiction world of Gasser’s paintings also stem, from this viewpoint, from a re-visited, high-tech orientalism. Because it is quite likely that, faced with a form of extra-terrestrial life, we would be tempted to apply the old epistemological formulae by anthropomorphizing it, even if that meant doing so by inverting the human properties (this is the whole subject of Lem’s \textit{Solaris}: is it possible to grasp the non-human in an appropriate way? If so, how? How are we to call the new?—Lem’s incredible linguistic inventiveness being an initial valid answer).

Another motif conveying this dialectic is the superstructures that we find at various moments in his work, which refer to organizations which he calls “post-national”. Everything resides in the “post”. It is a question of imagining that one day “a huge superstructure will replace nations, an idea that talks about “potential change on a large scale”\textsuperscript{21}

5 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{Ghosts of the past and zombies}

“I want to work with images which—for me—point in a direction which is that of the “vocabulary of the future”, Gasser explains again, with words which take us to David Robbins’s “post-art”, and his defence of an imagination freed from categories. "The idea that, in terms of imagination, not all categories have yet been created and identified, is
If a new category is to appear, we must let it appear. This calls for mental discipline, a discipline which consists in refusing tradition, opening the door to a still unknown future, and letting it come into the room, into the image and into your life so that it will take shape.”

So if Gasser’s work does have a discourse, it has less to do with appropriation than with the encounter with the new, the ever renewed possibility of inventing and creating conditions favourable to the expression of the imagination. What is involved, over and over again, is the construction of a future that is not totally programmed by the past (at the artistic level, but also at the political level), and learning how to tame this radical—maximum—strangeness, represented by the emergence of the new, according to Michael Schetsche’s concept (“der maximal Fremde”) from which Gasser has derived certain paintings. “All cultural practices appropriate elements of strange, exotic, peripheral or obsolete discourse, and incorporate it in their ever-changing idiom”, declared Benjamin Buchloh at the beginning of Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop and Sigmar Polke, linking back up with that dialectic of the known and the unknown. How in fact can a specific identity be perpetuated through a process of integrating strange materials? Here, exoticism and strangeness lead us to appropriation again. So here we are back at the point we started out from, precisely where there is a linkage between an anxious questioning of the risks of a cultural collapse, the weight of the cultural past, and the invention of a future.

So, yes, there is certainly a discourse about appropriation in Gasser’s work, in particular this idea that the relation we have with images is not instrumental, and that, if the truth be told, images (like our references) infect us. The certainty that it is possible to bring dead images back to life, and that the appropriated image is a living death (a thoroughly literal update, in In the Museum, of Crimp’s ideas about the ghostlike nature of the appropriated original). The assertion of a form of physical understanding of art and imagery (based on the repainting=understanding equation). With its wealth of references, and its cultural plenty, this work is also an invitation to delve into the history of art, film, graphics, and music, and read with a voracious appetite.

But contains above all a solid exhortation to get beyond the maniacal stage of the reference in which our culture seems as if captive, to invent, with these cultural things, forms of novelties. The first stage in this invention, Gasser tells us, is produced
when, instead of remaining trapped in a fetishist relation to the many different figures of authority, artistic and intellectual alike, we give ourselves leave to use them freely (“practicing without a license”, according to Richard Prince’s precept). So when Christopher Walken uses an Eva Hesse sculpture like a weapon, or a white monochrome by Robert Ryman as a shield against a zombie, when Duane Hanson’s *Queenie II* and the character in a Sherrie Levine work come to life, something takes place. The white is spattered with blood, the Ryman turns into Cy Twombly, and culture literally comes to life. All these transformations are in fact a vehement summons to link back up with the use value of culture, meaning freeing our imagination instead of decorating our bookshelves, even with the most exquisite intellectual taste. And if we do not answer this summons, we condemn ourselves to wander like zombies in a museum.

*Translated from French by Simon Pleasance*

**Notes**


4 Jörg Heiser, *ibid.*


9 In *Christopher Walken—In the Museum* (2011, unpublished), Mathis Gasser singles out at least four levels of reference in his work for *In the Museum*: “The first level is made up of works that are present in the imaginary exhibition. The second is formed by references to artists and works not physically present in the exhibition venue, but the object of visual allusions. A third level is made up of works that have influenced certain features of the project. A fourth level is made up of artists and works who/which have not any positive impact on the decisions that I have made for this film, but which nevertheless form an important basic level, like a map on which the project in its overall form might be situated. Needless to
say, the levels are not conceived in any rigid way; names and references will perhaps be added in the future. There is an ongoing exchange between the different levels. There might even be additional levels to come.”

10 Email exchanges with the artist, January 2013, unpublished.
13 The para-text is a concept developed by Gérard Genettes in *Palimpsestes*, describing a discourse accompanying a work.
14 The story unfolds in an alternative world, in which Japan and Germany have won the Second World War.
15 Email exchange with the author, unpublished, December 2012.
16 Steven Parrino, it just so happens, turned his works into extensions of a history that went beyond them, that of New York punk, and certain counter-cultures from the 1970s: “Les formes sont radicals dans le mémoire, en perpétuant ce qui fut radical autrefois par l’extension de leur histoire/Forms are radical in the memory by perpetuating what was once radical through the extension of their history”, in *The no texts*, p. 46.
17 “Even if I am not an unconditional fan of Matthew Barney, his *Cremaster Cycle* is also headed in this direction, constructing a (semi-) narrative world which places references/his own artworks by *weaving* them into a narrative.” *Ibid.*
18 Email exchange with the author, unpublished, December 2012.
21 Email exchanges with the author, December 2012, unpublished.
25 Jill Gasparina is the co-director (with Caroline Soyez-Petithomme) of La Salle de bains, Lyon http://www.lasalledebains.net/

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Zombies in pop culture are celebrated at the Living Dead Museum in Evans City, Pennsylvania, the filming location of the classic film Night of the Living Dead. The quintessential zombie film that introduced many horror movie tropes, Night of the Living Dead was filmed in and around Evans City by George Romero in 1967. Other zombie movies, television shows, comic books, and video game franchises are also shown on the museum’s timeline, like The Walking Dead and Resident Evil. In addition to the history of the undead, there are also celebrity handprints on the museum’s wonderfully titled, Maul of Fame, including George Romero’s, along with movie props and production photographs and notes. Given my unreasonable dislike for zombies, one might assume that I like zombie survival-themed games, because they’re all about bashing, smashing and blowing up zombies in wonderfully gory ways as to take out my frustration on them, but honestly I think that might be the reason why I don’t like them in the first place! It seems that everyone and their undead grandmother has done a zombie apocalypse game, film or whatever, and they all seem to follow the same pattern - disease makes people get extreme leprosy, survivors grab some guns and domestic tools, zombies get blown up, survi