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BERLIN UPDATE





GROWERS AND SHOWERS

Carson Chan on Eddie Peake at Peres Projects, Berlin

Dr. Hinter, a family physician, has an office directly above Javier Peres's Berlin gallery on Karl-Marx-Allee. To get to the doctor, patients enter through the art gallery, and proceed past the artworks on display to get upstairs. Given this arrangement, without metaphor, the work at Peres Projects is doctor's office art. The images and hangings that adorn most clinical waiting rooms are meant to be simply decorative – aiming to ease the mind with idyllic landscapes, and palliate dread with soft-hued pastels.

"One cannot think without metaphors,"¹

Susan Sontag wrote in "AIDS and its Metaphors", her 1988 essay updating her essay from a decade earlier about our culturally mediated understanding of cancer. Yet Sontag argues in both cases that

the healthiest way to think about our bodies is to avoid metaphoric thinking. The body is a real thing with real needs and desires, and as Sontag posits, metaphor contributes to mythification, and the formation of stigma.²

In recent years, British artist Eddie Peake (born in 1981) has been presenting the body and its sexuality with resolute candor. His black-and-white photographs in an exhibition at Rod Barton gallery (London, 2010) featured the artist variously getting a haircut, sitting naked on a sofa looking blithely into the camera, and, in two of the images, displaying his erection. Two years ago, the artist staged a football match at the Royal Academy, where he was studying at the time. Football nets were set up on either side of a large hall, pitch marks were taped to the wooden floors, and the match began with the players in the nude

save for their knee-high socks and shoes. Admiring the artistic nude is a Classical tradition, but with “Touch” (2012), Peake invited his viewers to test the porosity of the categorical boundaries that continue to shape Western worldviews. The masculinity of male athletes in sports like football, rugby, and American football is almost never challenged. Indeed, like present-day gladiators, they are the very people that maintain the archetypes of muscle-bound “heroes”. Running around naked, with their bodies’ sweaty, floppy bits exposed against the gallery’s white walls, Peake, without metaphor, reveals both the artistic nude, and the paragon athlete as scaffolds constructed on aged, shaky pretenses. Serving as both creator and performer, Peake was one of the players in “Touch”, and it seems that at the center of what has only been a few short years of Peake’s professional practice, is an intimate probe into the dynamics of viewership, the mechanism of self-representation, and the evolving definition of sexual identities.

To begin with the last point, Peake has often found himself branded as a straight male artist treading in gay male artist waters. As in the performances by Wojciech Kosmas that plumb the poetic depths of physical and emotional intercourse between men, gay, straight, or otherwise, Peake’s work seems unconcerned not only with labeling of orientation, but with the politics that have been built around them, and his practice is perhaps a sign for the loosening clout of an identity politics centered on sexual orientation in the Western world. For some, the cultural movement beyond established sexual identities is under-theorized, perhaps because groups who have fought to establish a minority position – the LGBT community, for example – are loath

to relinquish their hard-won positions. Many theorists propose queer as an internally diverse identifier that could escape the homo/hetero divide and the endless proliferation of particularized names. Others, like cultural theorist James Penney, argue that adversely, the establishment of a queer identity presupposes the dominant existence of a heteronormative one.³ In other words, does the insistence of a queer identity have its share in producing the hegemony of the straight one? Penney has also made the case that what the Western world has proscribed as queer (or a queer lifestyle) is largely confined to the post-capital material culture of the Global North.⁴ The desires, tastes, and needs of queer people who are poor, pre-industrial, globally disconnected, celibate, or, if you will, “straight”, are theoretically neglected. There is a preponderance of homoerotic imagery in Peake’s artistic output thus far, but if we were to maintain for a moment the not unproblematic elision between the artist’s sexual orientation and the position his artwork occupies on the queer/straight spectrum, why can’t a straight man be obsessed with hard cocks?

Like crudely made Ed Ruscha text paintings, Peake’s “Bountiful Ejaculate” (2013), and the Day-Glo “Deafening Bassline” (2013), both exhibited at Peres Projects, belong to a group of works the artist makes by spraying paint on a surface masked with tape that is applied to spell out words or trace out images. Sometimes, these surfaces are twice covered with bright colors, each time with a different masking, and in the case with both “Bountiful Ejaculate” and “Deafening Bassline”, an erect penis is seen behind masked text of the work’s titles. Sprayed on polished stainless steel, the subject of these works is three-fold: At once, we see the phallus, the titles of the



"Rowena Hughes, Eddie Peake, Jean Charles de Quillacq", Rod Barton, London, 2010, installation view

works masked out on the stainless steel, and our reflections within.

Seven other works in the exhibition are similarly made, and all these mirrored surfaces in the show produce the effect of a panopticon-like space – unless you're alone in the gallery, never are you not moving into someone else's line of sight. As with the ever expanding collection of mirror self portraits in Niko Princen's lasereyeselfies.tumblr.com, for Peake, seeing is situated in the specular dynamics of the self-broadcasted selfie. In the image of Peake getting a haircut in the Rod Barton exhibition, we meet his stare reflected in the barbershop mirror – we watch him watching us – and similarly, the per-

vasive sense of being observed at Peres Projects is compounded by a meandering, flesh-colored plaster wall that is punctured variously by doorways, picture windows, or holes, forcefully smashed through. Peake's wall focuses, rather than obscures, the gaze. Of course, Peres Projects sits on the ground floor of Karl-Marx-Allee; its fourth wall being a series of large windows opening the gallery to the city like a stage. A room viewable in one glance leaves little for the mind to desire; it is the masked view, the perforated wall that Peake inserted into the open gallery that transforms it into a space that leaves us wanting. Like a strip tease, desire is created not from nudity, but from the withholding of the final reveal, as

Roland Barthes famously wrote in his 1973 book, “The Pleasure of the Text”. The gallery’s transformation into a space of desire is reinforced by a new sound piece emitting from the unrenovated basement. Distorted voices sounding like guttural moans and groans echo through the low-ceiling labyrinth. Those who frequent gay darkrooms or sex clubs will recognize the sensation, albeit here, with the overhead lights turned on – an inverse, perhaps, of the Anal House Meltdown dance party in 2011 that Peake threw London with artist Prem Sahib, in complete darkness.

Leaning on various walls of the exhibition are acrylic cutouts of a cartoon lizard wearing a top hat. Animals including a giraffe, tiger, panda, and dolphin have appeared variously in Peake’s work. His show at White Cube Bermondsey in 2013 featured a full-size variant of Berthold Lubetkin’s 1934 penguin pool at the London Zoo, underscoring our unreturned pleasures derived from viewing captured wildlife. At once incongruous and welcoming, the lizard at Peres Projects prescribes the exhibition with a measure of innocence, and leavens the exhibition with a childlike whimsy, even if these works’ titles submerge them back into the depths of sex – one is called “Humongous, Unfathomably Massive in Fact, and Hard as Steel. Staggeringly Beautiful Too, With Velvety Skin That Shimmers In the Light When the Fore-skin Undulates and Ripples Over The Veins and Taught Fleshy Contours Beneath. Unerringly Rock Hard. Too Large” (2013). Peake’s is a concerted juvenescence: Amidst the heady, hormonal fog of erections and sex clubs is the feeling of having entered a prepubescent mind – evolving, taking shape. Peake’s viewers are consistently treated to both the neurotic prurience and the dizzy, reckless, adrenaline-fueled wonder of a certain

type of adolescent male mentality; a perspective seldom offered in contemporary art. Dancers simulated sex at the Tate Modern Tanks in 2012; smiley faces compulsively appear on his canvases; keypad typing slang slogans like “U GET HATED”, “LDN TING SWEAR DOWN”, and “!!!” chart his linguistic range. There are moments when it feels like Peake is simply goading for reaction – as if shouting “penis” in a hushed gallery – but the presence of his family in his practice brings matters into good faith. The lizard, for example, was created by Peake’s twin brother; he has collaborated with two of his sisters, one is a poet and the other a dancer; and his parents are both artists. Within this familial context (all the while underneath Dr. Hinter’s family practice) the exhibition’s sexualized juvenile worldview is nurtured with an expectant sense of something growing into fruition held still in time – a being perpetually in becoming.

Eddie Peake, “Penetrates The Body, Nullifies The Senses”, Peres Projects, Berlin, January 18–February 22, 2014.

Notes

- 1 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, New York 2001, p. 93.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 3 James Penney, *After Queer Theory. The Limits of Sexual Politics*, London 2014, pp. 10–23.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

CREDITS

Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (32); Soho House (34); Foto: Christian Brox (36); Foto: Nine Budde (37); Kunst-Werke Berlin, Christine Kisorsy (40); Foto: Jens Ziehe (43); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (44); Foto: Marco Funke (49, 56); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (61); Hanna Magauer (62); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (65); Heike-Karin Föll (66); Judith Hopf und Katja Reichard (68); Shedhalle Zurich, 1994 und Kunst-Werke Berlin, 1995 (71); Franco Stella, Stiftung Berliner Schloss – Humboldtforum (72); Foto: Julia Lazarus (76); Foto: Katja Eydel (78); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (82); Foto: Carlos Andrés López, Amerikafilm (83);); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (87); Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Die Berliner Jahre 1907–1938, Ausst.-Kat., hg. v. Terence Riley und Barry Bergdoll, Museum of Modern Art, New York u.a., 2001 (88); Megan Francis Sullivan, Freymond-Guth Fine Arts (90–91); Kleihues + Kleihues (94); Fabric, Marzona, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin 2014 (95); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (99); Foto: Carlos Andrés López, Amerikafilm (100); Pro qm (103); Foto: Thomas Aurin (107); Merve Verlag (110); Foto: Johannes Maas (114); b_books (118); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (123, 126); Skye Chamberlain, Foto: Alex Turgeon (129); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (130, 133, 137, 140, 144, 145, 151); Google Street View (154); Calla Henkel, Max Pitegoff (156, 159, 161); Anni Albers, Middleton, Wesleyan University Press, 1965, plate 12 (162); Asier Mendizabal (164); Stringer/AFP/Getty Images (166); Judith Raum (169); Maya Deren (171); Foto: Philipp Ottendoerfer (176); The Essential Ellen Willis, Minneapolis, 2014 (179); Foto: Sarah Bohn, Amerikafilm (182); Foto: Carlos Andrés López, Amerikafilm (184–185); Back Lot Music, Columbia (187); Sony Music Entertainment Inc. (188); Interscope, Streamline (190); Foto: Torben Hoeke (192, 194); Foto: Jens Ziehe (196–197); Fundación Gego, Foto: Claudia Garcés (199); The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Fundación Gego (201); Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, Foto: Chris Austin (202–203); Foto: Clare Britt (205, 207); Galerie Thomas Zander, Köln (208–209); Art Institute of Chicago 2014 (211); Christopher Williams, David Zwirner, New York und London, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln (212); Peres Projects, Berlin, Foto: Hans-Georg Gaul (214); Rod Barton, London (216); Gladstone Gallery, New York, Foto: David Regen (218, 221); Roman Polanski (220); Ed Atkins, Kunsthalle Zürich (223); Ed Atkins, Cabinet, London, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin (225); Courtesy Superflex, Foto: Anders Sune Berg (229–230); Collection Daniel Bosser, Mamco, Genf, Foto: Ilmari Kalkkinen (233); Collection Serge Aboukrat, Mamco, Genf, Foto: Ilmari Kalkkinen (235); Metro Pictures, New York (237, 241); Leigh Ledare, Baroque Gallery (238); Roni Horn, Artists

Space, New York, 2013 (243); Artists Space, New York, Foto: Daniel Perez (244, 247); Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt/M., Foto: Wolfgang Günzel (249, 251, 252); Estate of Nancy Holt/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2014, Foto: Peter Moore, Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA, NY (256); BBC (260); Foto: Cécile Huber (265); K.O. Götz (267); Axel Hütte (269); Texte zur Kunst (271)

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