

Sightseeing

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In his studio in Antwerp, Wesley Meuris designs and makes sculptures from generic forms, where architecture, design and exhibition designing meet. His favourite materials are wood, ceramic tiles and glass. His colours, neutral and cold: verdigris, turtle dove, salmon beige, eggshell.

Trained at the Sint-Lukas school of art and design in Brussels, he started by making sanitary facilities, cloakrooms, swimming pools and Olympic pools. He then expanded his repertoire to include zoo cages, furniture for archives and museum showcases. His life-size scale creations often merge with the surrounding space, and trap the visitor for an instant who takes them for replicas of existing objects.

But the forms are hollow, the showcases and cages are empty, the drawers impossible to open.

Up to now, the structures to which the artist referred were formally recognisable and for the most part identified with Foucauldian themes (hygiene standards, discipline of the body, organisation of knowledge, entertainment industries).

The new set of works produced for the exhibition entitled *Sightseeing* is nothing of the sort. Although they arouse a feeling of familiarity, these sculptures do not belong to a known typology. Their external appearance refers to nothing that can be named, and yet these pieces are the result of a crossing of constructional principles derived from the architectural and theatre designing vocabulary: cornice, cymatium, column, window, base, fence.

Thus, instead of producing forms that are both modular and “supergeneric” in a straight modernist line, the sum of these cannons of construction engenders a summary that resists the homogeneity that predetermines it. How can the accumulation of stereotypical structures engender singular forms? In other words, how does Meuris manage to foil the norm, whereas the latter constitutes the basic material of his work?

To start with, Meuris’s work is – against all expectations – characterised by manual – even handicraft – construction; sculptures that he makes entirely by himself without borrowing existing elements: “I need to make these objects so that I can talk about their reality without an intermediary.”¹

When he finished his art studies, the artist underwent training as a joiner in a company that made prefabricated buildings, where he learnt to master technical engineering, management strategies and industrial design. Concurrently master builder and client, he is the author, technician and producer of all diagrams, technical plans and volumes used in his work, from cut to installation.

1 Interview with Wesley Meuris, May 2012.

Whereas the physical encounter of the spectator with these normative structures is at the heart of his production, Meuris's work is in parallel geared to a more conceptual practice through the elaboration of a set of classification and archiving systems, by way of caption to his sculptures, drawings, plans, posters and books of artists. In 2004, the *Zoological Classification System* listed the animal species in accordance with their conditions of exhibition in a zoo, the ambient temperature, humidity and available light, as well as the appropriate materials and measurements for the cages and aquariums that Meuris creates on a life-size scale.

The seemingly infallible archiving method harbours extravagant facts that recall the "eccentric conceptualism" inherited from Belium, one of the finest examples of which is Marcel Broodthaers. In 2009, *The World's Most Important Artists* archive attests to a growing interest for the sociological and economic mechanisms inherent in the world of art. It provides an encyclopaedic index that makes it possible to find the "most important artists in the world" by crossing search criteria by discipline and subject, according to their mental condition (intelligence, dyslexia, depression, creative conscience, schizophrenia, etc.). The printed index placed at the disposal of visitors comprises codes and categories that guide their ambling among hundreds of labelled drawers in front of archival furniture constructed like empty shells.

For his exhibition *R-05.Q-IP.0001* at the Luxembourg Casino in 2012, Meuris extended this search for the creation of the *Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge* (FEAK), dedicated to the collection, lending and dissemination not of works but of "extraordinary," "innovative" and "creative" exhibitions. The meliorative exhibitions disseminated with parsimony and malice in the work dedicated to FEAK² neutralise the rigour of the scientific and theoretical sources. The interviews with researchers and histories of the exhibition try to legitimise the diagrams, tables and apologetic adverts of exhibitions, fairs, biennales, reviews and seminars sponsored by the foundation.

If the archive initially gives an impression of "filling" the vacant silence of its structure, it is actually as empty as his penguin ponds and shop facades: a mental structure without data, content or matter. The index, plan and advertising documents incarnate the "media" surface of his sculptures, thereby revealing the inestimable value of our century, beyond any financial speculation: information.

For a number of years now, Meuris has conducted in-depth research into the means of transmitting knowledge in museums. He has developed several typologies of exhibition furniture which reiterate the setting devices of large museums and mass events inherited from the world exhibitions of the 19th century. "To exhibit art is to create a clinging situation that is never pure. My aim is not to show the content but the context and the structure that exhibit it,"³ specifies Meuris directly in line with the conceptual adage of Michael Asher: "context as content." The result is a series of showcases and

² Cf. Wesley Meuris, ed., *Feak: The Foundation for Exhibiting Art & Knowledge*, Artist Books Limited, 2012.

³ *Ibid.*

caissons, exhibited as such, emptied of their content, intended to compare, juxtapose, isolate and confront art objects. *Compare two magnificent pieces of the collection* (2012) and *Story of a Unique Exhibition* (2012) embody the dogmatic transmission of a pseudo-scientific knowledge that is exhibited without research hypothesis nor a will to experiment.

In connection with the FEAK, Meuris has reproduced the ground plans of architectural spaces, each of which represent a different exhibition typology: museum of ancient cultures, mosque, garden of sculptures, hospital greenhouse, contemporary art fair and auditorium. This series of technical drawings, once printed on a large format against a black background and in the same graphic style, shows the common denominator of these public buildings, whether cultural, civil or religious. Designed to regulate our perception and behaviour, these “exhibition” spaces exalt the visit through the symmetrical volumes and strategic proportions inherited from architectural functionalism and rationalism. A shopping arcade, theatre, large exhibition hall... the series never ceases to expand by updating the common tactics for mass entertainment and transmission of knowledge.

The posters produced in 2012 by the FEAK announce various events such as “The Great White Journey,” the first Biennale of the Antarctica, or the “Exclusive Art Fair,” an advert for a contemporary art fair in an industrial hangar. “Highlights from the nocturnal world” and “Acquired Taste” propose combined formulas with tourist visits in the forest and tasting of fruit cocktails. *Admission Tickets* (2012) is a series of museum admission tickets that reiterate the pouncing patterns of the visual and verbal communication of blockbuster exhibitions. Composed with existing elements, these communication media are the result of commercial strategies that heighten the exhibition of the works.

The title of the exhibition, *Sightseeing*, must consequently not be understood only in the primary meaning of tourism; it also attests to a cultural history of gaze, where the perception of a minimal sculpture encounters the set designs of a large department store. Meuris combines the archetypal forms that give the impression of a “semi-realistic” facsimile. Although the reference of the original object remains plausible, the result tends towards a generic abstraction that leaves the visitor in uncertainty as to the exact nature of the place. With its green plant and its gate, *Corner* (2013) is a hybrid sculpture half way between a waiting room and a *showroom*. The shelf and pedestals of *Shelf With Pedestals* (2013) are waiting, as if in a storeroom. *Wall Window* (2013) can be deployed in space or fit together like a construction game. Consisting for three fourths of glass plates, the modular cymatiums turn the gallery to the scale of a life-size window which refers to its commercial function. Turned inside out like a glove, the exhibition is traversed concurrently from the inside and the outside, revealing that concepts materialise not only outside.