

The Zoological Utopia of Wesley Meuris

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In Wesley Meuris' work there is first of all the interest in the building with the perfect materials, the cool tiles, the high-quality wood, the transparent reflective glass. In his installations Meuris employs and cultivates all the elementary principles of architecture. We had already seen certain things in his previous work. Wesley Meuris has since 1999 been polishing up his artistic profile with extraordinary consistency. His installations offer us the artistic transposition of something like an 'historical-social architecture'. From the urinal (NICC, Antwerp) or the latrine (Ename Actueel) to the swimming pool (Eclips, Willebroek), it is always a matter of the architectural aestheticisation of the everyday experience of the banal, of a recontextualisation of vital primary needs by a calculating and formalising imagination. A work quite representative of Meuris was also to be seen at *Damn'art '04*, the exhibition circuit in Damme in 2004, one which illustrated the basic idea of his art. The 'impulse' was the 'ruins' of the former harbour at Damme, a so-called archaeological monument, to which Meuris added his artistic 'prosthesis': here too tiled panels were used, rhetorical and aestheticising in their utter artificiality (light-grey tiled surfaces, perfect and coolly attractive).

Meuris' fascination for architecture is complemented by a tangle of subtle motifs. He can be metaphysically moved when the matter in hand is the 'habitation' of the penguin, rhinoceros, tree kangaroo, hippopotamus or okapi. The object labelled with the ideological term 'animal cage' is in fact a habitat, a 'living room', custom-made for the animal 'occupant', more ideally suited than the average mortal is ever granted. Over the years the animal cage has become ever more dysfunctional and unreal: the last specimens in the series of animal cages Meuris erected, the 'night cages' (*The Incredible Nightlife of the Tropical Forest*, *Artefact 2007*, Stuk, Leuven) are hardly visible; they only appear, as imaginary, unearthly apparitions, indeterminable and abstract, when the eyes have, after a long time, become accustomed to the dark. If the artist has indeed experienced existential emotions regarding animals' living conditions, they are certainly embedded in an obsessional focus on classification, coding and exhaustive taxonomy, even though the summary and encyclopaedic ordering is artificial and exaggerated. Meuris does nevertheless know a lot about zoological variety, the history of zoos and the artistic depictions of them. But what immediately strikes one is the urge to collect, the archivist mentality, the exhaustiveness of the information. Tables of statistics, specific dimensions and materials, with mention of the animal families and their generic species, these are all part of the artist's dossier and give it all a proto-scientific tint. The table of 'zoological classification' provides a great many precise parameters (humidity, temperature, light intensity) and in this system each animal is given a highly-developed typology and code number. The specifications also include the Latin name, the place in the world where the animal can be found, its feeding time and so on. One of the most subtle tables concerns the 'nocturnal light system for a night cage', which will be shown in the large night cage installations. An even more astonishing graphic overview shows us a 'World Enclosure. A compilation of nine animal habitats brought together in one enclosure. Visit the world in one hour and observe the creatures in their artificial biotope': a sort of Noah's Ark where all the world's animals come

together on/in an architecturally perfect installation that is so exhaustive and so well adapted to the animal kingdom that only the Creator can have invented it.

Remarkably, paradoxically and even necessarily, the animals' 'habitats' remain (by definition) empty. This is inevitable because the zoo is virtual. Just as Panamarenko's machines will never fly, Meuris' zoo will always be without animals. We are a long way from Joseph Beuys' performance (1974) in which he had himself locked up in a cage with a coyote for five days (the title of the work was *Coyote: I like America and America likes me*).

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One might say that Meuris' project is actually about the livability and survival of animals: in this way he wishes every happiness to the kangaroo or the okapi that have to spend their lives in captivity, even if it is in a luxury artificial cage. The (moral) burden lies on the interacting human, the zoologist, the person who commissions the building, the spectator. Identification, numbering, codifying, classification, and then building as finely as possible, this is what mankind owes the animal kingdom. Yet it is notable that, according to him, Meuris' constructions do not really serve animals' interests, but mainly the 'interest' of the spectator. This is where we come to the essence of Meuris' concept. This is the sort of art that is concerned with the relationship between the work of art and the participating spectator. So what does the spectator's 'interest' mean here? His safety? There will never be any snapping lions or strangulating boas in Meuris' virtual zoo. It is much more about the spectator's intellectual 'interest', his cognitive excitement, the pleasure of the classifying meditation and the identifying control. Meuris is indeed aiming for the spectator's visual attention, but it is a visuality that is intensely intellectual, even cerebral.

This sort of visual pleasure is also 'aesthetic' in the classic sense: there is so much perfection, order and mathematical balance here. It is inconceivable that a speck of dust should be found in the cage of the *Dendrolagus dorianus*, and mud for the wild boar or faeces from the elephant are absolutely unsuited to Meuris' installations. To the classical aesthete, art and life are far removed from each other, in contrast to the views of the post-Beuys demagogues. Despite the subtle classifications Meuris constructs and despite the extensive encyclopaedic knowledge he has assembled – and probably precisely because of this taxonomic and encyclopaedic attitude – we are here in an imaginary world. This is not the real world of animals shut up in a zoo but a projection of an exceptionally imaginative artificiality: it is not so much the (ecological) solidarity with the animal world that fascinates us in Meuris' project, but rather the original way it is transposed to a world of contemplative pleasure, of a sort of intellectual passivity and of the unexpected rediscovery of cosmic harmony. The sense of the cosmos, where nature, man and the animals are one, is a feeling that we enjoy: the enjoyment of the forms, colours and volumes that transcends any anecdotalism.

There are several things that remind us of Michel Foucault, not so much the Foucault of *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975, see Michel Dewilde's article) but of the introduction to *Les mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966). For that matter, we know that Wesley Meuris reads and meditates on Foucault. In this sublime introduction Foucault deals precisely with the interpenetration of taxonomic thinking and the imagination. It was an odd piece by Borges that led him to do so. This piece quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia' which says that 'the animals can

be divided into the following classes: a. belonging to the Emperor, b. embalmed, c. tamed, d. suckling pigs, e. sirens, f. fabulous, g. dogs that run free, h. all those that are included in this classification, i. Those that move as if they were mad, j. uncountable, k. drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l. and so on, m. those that have just broken the jar, n. which from afar appear similar to flies.’ And Foucault’s comment is that this sort of Oriental encyclopaedic taxonomy points out the limits of our Western thought: the whole of Linnaeus’ ‘botanic philosophy’ (his main work is *Systema naturae*), Tournefort’s writings on the classification of species of grass, Buffon (*Histoire naturelle des oiseaux*), and also a taxonomy that will certainly interest Meuris: the *Historia naturalis de quadripedibus*, a work by a certain Jonston in Amsterdam, published in 1657, show the Western type of order and classification in which only observation counts and the imagination is excluded. Meuris wants to take his place in this proto-scientific intention. At first sight, at least. This proto-scientific project is not realistic, cannot be implemented, and does not evade the power of imagination. It is a *utopian* project: *u-topia*, it does not belong in reality, but is related more to the Eastern encyclopaedia than to Western empirical ‘natural philosophy’. Meuris is not a scientist but an artist, and art is the great reserve of utopias. The space here is being dreamed – the cages are dream objects in which the living animals can do nothing but remain absent. ‘Natural philosophy’ becomes aesthetics and we come very close to the Chinese encyclopaedia that fascinated Borges and with him Foucault.

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Meuris’ art has no message or pretensions. It is not any form of committed art with an ecological message or a call for the rights of animals. Nevertheless, it does in a certain sense have a *critical* function. The criticism inherent in the work of art is cautious, prudent and analytical. No explicit annihilation of ideologies but a simple ‘separation’ (*krinein*), a ‘disentangling’ of a realm of meanings that can be isolated. Even though the artist provides legitimation in the form of a dossier, this ‘critique’ is nevertheless not discursive but material, meaning that it is presented in the materials, their combination and their thingish brilliance. One should see Meuris’ work as a ‘critique on exhibiting’. The concept of ‘exhibiting’ is unravelled, i.e. subjected to ‘critique’. And this unravelling derives its inner strength from aestheticisation. So, no call of ‘Away with the cage, away with the zoo, away with the museum’, but an intelligent analysis of the concept of ‘exhibiting’. With the obvious metonymic shift from the zoo to the museum: the cage of *Dendrolagus dorianus* in the virtual zoo, the cage of the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre. The *Dendrolagus* and the *Mona Lisa* are protected, screened off, enveloped, ‘exhibited’ for the contemplation of the interacting viewer who thereby enjoys aesthetic pleasure. This enjoyment is ambiguous, as psychoanalysis tells us: we ourselves are safe and nothing can happen to us – hypocritical enjoyment; we do not merge with what exhibits itself – the pleasure of the voyeur.

The metonymic shift from the zoo to the museum is subtly suggested in Meuris’ project. So it really is not in the first place about animals and about habitation, about building, about zoological classification, not even about the gratuitous beauty of materials, lines and forms. It is the ‘unravelling’ of how, in an artificial ‘exhibition’ (of animals or works of art), the spectator/participant is gripped by the ambiguity of his (aesthetic) pleasure. And how an ‘exhibition’ elicits this sort of perverse voyeuristic attitude. Key Portilla-Kawamura (see this author’s article in this book) has already noted that Meuris’ project implies the historical truth that the zoo and the

museum have common origins. Double origins, in fact. As early as the 16th century, rare and peculiar objects from the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds were collected in the *Wunderkammer*, a curio room, to astonish the aristocracy. But this sort of *Wunderkammer* can also 'exhibit' artificial objects produced by man. This first ('baroque'), origin cultivates the frivolous, the unexpected and the anecdotal. Later, in the Enlightenment (late 18th century) came the second origin of the zoo/museum. The museum and the zoo (and the botanical garden too) are thus the places where objects (animals and works of art) are collected, kept and exhibited in the light of their systematic archiving: the most important factor here was exhaustiveness. Meuris' project was probably inspired by both origins, but it is the desire for taxonomic archiving that dominates: not so much the frivolous, anecdotal and arbitrary presentation that comes to the fore, but the thoroughly mathematically considered 'mentality'. And yet it is not the relevance of this objective pole of 'exhibiting' (the exhibition in the zoo/museum in its objective empiricism) that draws Meuris' attention, but the subjective pole: the work of art's invitation to the public, the interaction between the work and the spectator/participant, the emotion and the pleasure, in all its ambiguity and complexity, that a work provokes in a subject. Without a subject to enjoy it, an empty animal cage is not even an idea from the imagination. It must be added here that the work of art only exists for the enjoyment of a subject who is exceptionally 'civilised', intelligent and capable of aestheticisation. The subject's emotion does not express itself in (revolutionary) cries about animal rights or in bursting into tears. Rather, there is an identification, control and enquiry, always with the intelligence of *homo aestheticus*. Meuris' project calls on the ability to aestheticise, and it is only the *aesthetic* eye (free of any interest in function and practice), with its voyeuristic streak, that sees the Thing as it is: a conglomeration of definite building strategies, a proto-ethics, a call to the intellect and mind of *homo aestheticus*.