

Show, don't tell. Framing Wesley Meuris

Pieter Vermeulen

Wesley Meuris' work is not amenable to plain interpretation or easy to unfold. He deliberately leaves subtlety and ambiguity in his work. As a hint to the attentive viewer, or perhaps more to the nonchalant one. To the average museum visitor, the seasoned art fault-finder, the philosopher, the tourist, the museum curator – who is to say? Meuris appears above all to want to show, without spilling too many words. His exact motives are never fully expressed, and it remains a question whether they ever can be. Which is why this interim overview will be more like a quest, an examination of an oeuvre that does not fit simply into any framework, because it is constantly questioning or undermining that framework.

Between yes and no

Let's start our investigation at an institution often mentioned by the artist, the Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge (FEAK). It is an overarching global institution which, judging from the website and accompanying publication, is engaged in the development of concepts for exhibitions, biennales and fairs, for their production, cultural development, communication, tourism, research, art criticism and so on. In short, the whole professional framework that surrounds the arts, from products to the provision of services. The Foundation is run by specialised researchers and also has archives and a library that serve as a centre of expertise. FEAK organises, regulates and controls and thereby meets contemporary needs.

Except that the FEAK is a sham. Or rather, it is fictional, an ingenious fantasy on the part of Wesley Meuris. This will after a time dawn on anyone who leafs through the publication, visits the website or studies the promotional material. There are sufficient hints that point in that direction, subtle though they may be. But it is also clear that the artist is not concerned with creating a seamless simulation. And precisely for this reason one will start realising that the fiction reveals something of the facts. Does fiction not frequently prove itself to be a rewarding detour by which to understand reality better? To use Emerson's wise words: 'Fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures'.

Over recent decades, the art world has not only become thoroughly professionalised, but has also matured into what, more than half a century ago, Adorno and Horkheimer still dared denounce as the 'culture industry'. A sector of society which spans virtually the entire globe and produces more things than ever before, thus aligning with the mainstream. From private collections and museums to franchise fairs and biennales, a sense of spectacle and a touch of commerce are not shunned in the least. Marketing, as a non-discipline, plays a crucial part in it. The 'Artworld' that the American art philosopher Arthur Danto referred to in 1964¹ has since ramified into a rampant, hyper-productive multiverse. A powerful system which in its market-oriented operation leaves little undisturbed and for the most part can be suspected of a sort of economic imperialism. A relatively recent industry that has undoubtedly left its mark on artistic production.

It is not simple to escape the commercial carousel, or simply to walk away. And not only difficult, but equally naïve. These are at least the lessons we can learn from several decades of institutional criticism. Is the distinction between art and framework as clear as we think? Since the 1960s artists have stormed the institutions – entirely justifiably – as hegemonic monsters steered by complex social, cultural and political mechanisms. The exposure of this ideological mechanism was a prominent mission statement, with such pioneers as Hans Haacke as witnesses. And even though the weapons were mixed, fiction turned out to be a much relished approach. Numerous artists – including Marcel Duchamp, Daniel Buren and Claes Oldenburg² -- established imaginary museums or used falsification as an artistic strategy. With his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968-1971), Marcel Broodthaers denounced existing, dominant museum practices by means of a fictional institution. He thereby claimed to reverse the structure of Duchamp's readymade by not claiming 'this is a work of art', but 'this is a museum'.³ This fictionalisation served not only to criticise the museum, but also to subject it to an investigation, to analyse it. And of course he did this with a healthy dose of Belgian humour, however that is to be defined.

Wesley Meuris is undoubtedly indebted to this conceptual Belgian tendency, which runs roughly from Marcel Broodthaers to Guillaume Bijl. His work has a sort of underhand humour that will not exactly make the visitor laugh out loud, but rather make him think. The FEAK is fictitious, but also deadly serious. This is why Meuris opts to call it faction, a semantic combination of fact and fiction. Irony is not a dead-end street, but precisely the subtle playing with the façade, flirting with the promise of content, expertise and authority.

Meuris' work simultaneously nods a 'yes' and shakes a 'no', and therefore cannot easily be compartmentalised. Architectural scale models enable the artist to slightly disrupt reality and thus bend it to his purposes. By means of a process of construction and deconstruction, he makes visible the dominant representational mechanisms that lead to standard ways of looking, acting and speaking.

From irony to cynicism (and back)

Perhaps irony is not criticism, but at most a questioning or comment. It is not a critique of institutions, or at least not in the traditional sense. Meuris' work does not suggest any alternatives, and at no time does it pretend to do so. So let's take another tack in our investigation. Because, if his work offers no way out, can we accuse him of being cynical?

In his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), Peter Sloterdijk makes a distinction between *kynicism* and cynicism. *Kynicism* represents cynicism in its original sense, named after a school of philosophy in ancient Greece that scorned all worldly desires (for money, power, sex, fame and so forth) and aspired to a simple life free of any material possessions. It rejected the dominant official forms of culture by pointing out the futility of the constant pursuit of power, or by exposing the obscene dark side of political idealism. Cynicism, by contrast, is the reaction by the prevailing culture to this *kynical* subversion. It no longer claims to have a monopoly on the truth, but rather sees through the mendacity of its own ideological façade. The cynic readily admits his lies or errors, but does not thereby see sufficient reason to act accordingly and let his mask drop.⁴ In spite of the gaping chasm between the rules and the reality, he continues to act in accordance with these same rules. According to such thinkers as Sloterdijk, Žižek and Virno,⁵ this cynicism has degenerated into a new sort of (post-) ideology that

crops up transversally in numerous sectors of society. This is more the rule than the exception in the contemporary art world too. For example, the powerful art guru Charles Saatchi negatively described the art world as 'atrocious' and 'vulgar',⁶ and a year later, during the Frieze art fair, published an opinion piece entitled 'Art fairs are Not Fair to Art'.⁷

So if cynicism is so sold on the prevailing culture, how can an artist still in any sense take up a critical or independent position? Has cynicism become an unavoidable survival strategy in the art world, rather than a subversive force? As Bertolt Brecht wrote in his *Threepenny Opera* (1928): 'What is robbing a bank compared to founding a bank?'

We can of course just as well view this situation as a challenge that requires new artistic approaches. One of them is 'over-identification'. Whereas this is usually linked with forms of activism, it may also be independent of them. As a reaction to the dominance of cynicism, over-identification as a strategy is not based on negation, but on confirmation, on an emphatic 'yes'. It analyses and studies the specific conventions of a system and later copies and applies them. It is precisely the mirroring of this ingenious, quite literal copy that allows the ideological construction to be undermined.⁸ As an extension of irony, over-identification is also a recognisable motif in Wesley Meuris' artistic practice. He meticulously analyses existing mechanisms of representation in architecture, museums and the art industry and then cites them in the exhibition space.

The desire for transparency

Nothing can be shown in a neutral way. *The Power of Display*, an influential book on exhibition architecture, neatly brings two elements together: power and display.⁹ Not that the display of power is always so transparent, but that proves the power of display itself. Rhetoric lies not only in words, but also in a broader process of 'framing'. In this sense, the mechanisms of exhibitions and power are inseparably linked. And this does not even have to be related to art. Just think of world fairs, zoos and colonial exhibitions, things which continue to fascinate Wesley Meuris. As an institution, the museum has always played a leading part in the formation of the nation state, the writing of its history and the establishment of a canon.¹⁰ In this regard, representation is a crucial and at the same time problematic notion.

Nowadays it is extremely complicated to situate or identify the institutional framework of a museum. According to Agamben, the Museum (as an abstract notion) is in fact everywhere, it is now almost impossible to escape it. This may sound like a lazy quip, but it is not. What he is referring to is a broader process of 'museumisation' whereby the 'museum' as an institution extends beyond its four walls.¹¹ It is no longer a matter of a well-defined physical space, but a process whereby certain phenomena which were formerly an important and integral part of our society are now gradually being set apart from it. In this way, a Museum may be the same thing as a city (e.g. Venice), a region (e.g. a nature reserve) or a group of living beings (e.g. an endangered species). And just as a temple or a place of pilgrimage attracts pilgrims, the Museum is visited by tourists.

This combination of supposed protection (conservation) and isolation or alienation is what is meant by the term 'Disneyfication', a transformation whereby everything is reduced to a show or attraction while nothing can still really be used.

But to understand the present order better, we have to go a step further. Whereas in a consumer culture it is amusement value that triumphs, in the 'transparent society' (Byung-Chul Han¹²) everything exists by grace of its exhibition value, its stark exposure. *Pornofication* is driven by society's desire for transparency, in politics, the media and culture. Whereas in Disneyfication there is still a distinction between the artificial façade and the reality behind it, the 'pornofied' society claims no longer to hide anything but to reveal everything openly. There is something obscene about this desire for transparency in that it claims not to leave anything concealed, although it cannot possibly succeed in this. The apparatus seems to offer a neutral glimpse inside, but precisely on this point proves itself to be illusory.

Contemporary art fairs are a rewarding example. The philosopher Frank Vanderveire once commented: 'Art fairs are to art what porn is to eroticism. In both cases it is a matter of disappearance, being swallowed up by the total mobilisation, by obscene transparency. In both cases it is the end of seduction.'¹³ And just as every hardcore, full-exposure porn film not only conceals a full camera crew and also a whole industry and commerce, the 'transparent' and 'neutral' architecture of the 'white booths' at the art fair contrast sharply with the manipulative market mechanisms that are free to operate in the wings. Is this why we often see palm trees figuring in his set-ups, as architectural elements that make even more of a problem of the supposed contrast between inside and outside? The ideal of transparency that permeates so many corporations, institutions and also museums these days seems to be beyond politics and ideology, but this is precisely what makes it so deceptive.

Compare this with the technocrat who thinks he does not have to concern himself with politics, and intends to decide and act purely on the basis of his expertise. Numerous areas of society are now framed by this supposed expertise or research.¹⁴ This sort of misleading neutral position is precisely what characterises the 'culture of experts' in the era in which we live.

It was this that led to the recent *Staging Speech* works by Wesley Meuris, in which he devotes particular attention to the architectural context of such public addresses as lectures, talks, speeches and oratory. The visual idiom used reveals something of the obsessive desire for transparency. In German there are two words for representation: *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. *Darstellung* means the way something is presented or portrayed, while *Vertretung* has a political meaning, in the sense of representing or 'speaking on behalf of'. Neither can possibly exist in its pure form; they are always interwoven, just as the rhetoric of the image is with that of the word. In this way Meuris applies himself to the techniques and procedures of communication, and so also of the transfer of knowledge and political conviction. In his refined and recognisable style, he continues to deconstruct the double meaning of representation, as he always has done.

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¹ Arthur Danto: 'The Artworld'. In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, Issue 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting (15 Oct. 1964), 571-584. Significantly, the article starts with a dialogue from Shakespeare's Hamlet: "Do you see nothing there?" – "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see."

² For an extensive overview, see A.A. Bronson & Peggy Gale (eds.): *Museums by Artists*, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1983.

³ 'A conversation with Freddy de Vree, 1969'. Quoted in: Alexander Alberro & Blake Stimson (eds.): *Institutional Critique. An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2009, p. 5.

⁴ Žižek summarises this as follows: 'They know very well what they are doing, yet they keep on doing it.' See Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London/New York, Verso, 1989, pp. 28-30.

⁵ Paolo Virno: *Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles: Columbia University, 2004. For a more specific application to the art world, see Pascal Gielen: 'The Biennial. A Post-Institution for Immaterial Labour' in: *The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon. Strategies in Neopolitical Times*, Open no. 16, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 2009, pp. 8-18.

⁶ Charles Saatchi: 'The Hideousness of the Art World'. In: *The Guardian*, 2 December 2011.

⁷ Charles Saatchi: 'Art Fairs Are Not Fair to Art'. In: *The Evening Standard* (London, England), 11 October 2012.

⁸ The source of this concept is again Slavoj Žižek: "... an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it... For that reason, an ideological edifice can be undermined by a too-literal identification". In: *Plague of Fantasies*, London, Verso, 1997, pp. 21-22. For further development of this idea, see the publication of the BAVO Belgian research collective: *Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-Identification*, episode publishers, 2009.

⁹ Mary-Anne Staniszewski: *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, MIT Press, 2001. A conversation between Professor Staniszewski and the curator Michel Dewilde is in fact also included in the publication by the Foundation for Exhibiting Art and Knowledge, edited by Wesley Meuris. See www.wesleymeuris.be.

¹⁰ On this topic, see Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London/New York, Verso, 2006.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben: 'In Praise of Profanation'. In: *Profanations*, New York: Zone Books, 2007, pp. 83-85.

¹² See Byung-Chul Han: *Transparenzgesellschaft*. Berlin, Matthes & Seitz, 2012. This essay has not yet been translated into English.

¹³ Frank Vande Veire: 'De funeraire scène van het object. Rondom de installaties van Guillaume Bijl'. In: *Guillaume Bijl exhib. cat., MUHKA*, 1996, p. 38. Vande Veire is actually paraphrasing Barnett Newman's quip: "Aesthetics is for artists what ornithology is for birds".

¹⁴ The present wave of academisation of higher art education is an excellent example of this.