

## ***Autobiography of a display cabinet***

*Interview between Wesley Meuris and Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk*

*The work by Wesley Meuris is marked by speeches. Though his sculptures may be considered as seemingly taciturn and contemplative on the outlook, his works are ostensibly more capacious and expressive than their neutral surfaces might imply. Here one could speak of a feigned silence and neutrality, as his works are charged with ambiguity and a sense of powerplay between various actors, among institutional bodies, artists, visitors and the artworks they come to present and encounter in a readily subjective experience—so often presented as objective matters of fact. Driven by an ongoing interest in the dynamics and politics of display, among exhibition formats and institutional models, Meuris' work is concerned with the fundamental spatial languages of displaying and exhibiting within art contexts—spatial and written languages made of objects, reference and classification systems that essentially enable and support museological knowledge production and distribution through classification and hierarchization. Here it is notable to mention his ongoing project and organization FEAK (The Foundation for Exhibiting Art & Knowledge), which grapples with the diverse aesthetics and workings of large scale exhibition enterprises. However, rather than merely supporting, in Meuris' work the object of display becomes both subjectmatter and subject in its own right. Making a close reading of the materiality and conceptual underpinnings of display modules, among plinths, pedestals, vitrines, cabinets, information displays and book publications, and their embedding within the exhibition, the institutional archive and library, Meuris shows us how and by what means these structures and figurations are vision-inducing and transporting devices that create environments, enable and control perceptual conditions, and provide groundings for the production of subjectivity. In other words, the context of exhibiting art becomes the content of the work, as the the vice of conceptual artist Michael Asher goes.*

*In this interview for his exhibition at Galerie Jerome Poggi, we come to speak about the initial triggers that prompted his fascination for the politics of display, as well as the fictitious and elusive dimensions of the overarching entities in which these displays are embedded, among the structure of an agency, a gallery, an art fair, and a museum. More recently, Meuris has enquired into the possibilities and potentials of 'future thinking' in relation to how such sizable and ambiguous domains might inform the conception and materialization of display.*

**Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk:** *In your work you are often concerned with display methods and politics. Could you elaborate a bit further on this ongoing interest?*

**Wesley Meuris:** This interest initially took shape while I was working on my project *Zoological Classification* (2006), during which I became increasingly interested in the architectural design of animal enclosures. Not merely for the ways by which these designs create a livable context for exotic animals, but rather to engage in showing how these particular animals are shown as 'creatures on display'.

Often, conditions are created to observe them in the most comfortable way—from a human point of view— by

creating lifted platforms for direct eye contact with the animals, the use of glass generating proximity between object and observer, without having the hindrance of smell or experiencing some anxiety over a possible attack. Additionally, many other architectural mechanisms are used to maximize the experience for those who are on the illusionary free side of the separation; at the end, the gaze of the spectator is also caged. Whether 'the eyes' seek entertainment, scientific proof, or just have the desire of looking: in almost every case the animal cannot escape the gaze of the observer.

At a later stage, the linkages between zoological display—several enclosures arranged in a consequential order—and museum display—objects and systems of knowledge arranged within an architecture—became more obviously present in my work, but simultaneously an interesting and additional complexity appeared. More precisely so: the correlation between the constructed environment and the program of an institute as a significant ground to orchestrate a balanced context for objects on display. Not necessarily limited to one type of museum, I delved into a visual research. The showcase, the museum barrier and the information desk are just a few of the devices I examined to unravel their effects and power within the experience of the museum. Beside the physical and constructed environments present within a museum—among different types of exhibition platforms—the facilitation of information is rather important. By 'information', I do not exclusively mean the accompanying label of the object on display, but rather the overarching constructed program that influences the gaze and the ways in which the object of interest is perceived. I do not have to emphasize that there still is and has been done a substantial amount of research on how an exhibition could be conceived and set up: ranging from research on the content of the exhibition, but also on how the visitor behaves within the trails set out within an exhibition, to how the eye scans the architecture, the pedestals, the labels and hopefully also the objects on display. I just want to stress the power and politics of display, the considerable impact of the context.

However, there is not always a clear-cut method in creating display. When I analyze the architecture and infrastructure of institutions that show, archive, conserve and present artefacts and other objects more and less related to art, I cannot rid myself of the palpable and visible field of tension between the scientific policy on the one hand, and the visually stimulating presentation on the other: between the collection as heritage and the institutions' longing for renewal, between political control and artistic freedom, economic input and public return, and so on, and so forth. The negotiation and dynamic between these parameters—in relation to the physical design and the communication mechanisms—are an inexhaustible domain of fascination for me.

**NJL:** *Could you speak about the idea of establishing an agency, as prompted in the title of your gallery exhibition? How does this identity function for you as an artist, as it connotes a more corporate environment?*

**WM:** My show at Galerie Jerome Poggi carries the title '*The Agency c.o.*'. In that sense, it only refers to the concept of 'an agency'; and by doing so, there is no real agency. The idea of an agency contextualizes the perception of what is on display. Here the use of the title almost has the same function as a pedestal: it simultaneously hides and highlights elements. 'The Agency' is an overarching term I employ as something which indicates an environment

of assembled theories and perceptions. There is something very ambiguous and intangible to entities such as foundations, cooperatives, agencies, and so on. Often, a vision statement or a strong slogan gives a first understanding of what these entities stand for. They indisputably cover much more than the few lines they initially show, among a variety of functions, interests, ideologies, motives, aims, ambitions, and other directing aspects, which are hinted at but remain largely obscured. Only by getting acquainted with the organization are you able to get an insight.

For the implementation and further enhancement of 'The Agency' the gallery is very well located, with an entrance straight from the sidewalk into the exhibition space. It also has some features that are familiar with the kind of entrances and lobby areas of corporate enterprises and agencies. Without creating any optical illusion, I will add a number of sculptural elements, and paint the back wall to incorporate the surrounding architecture in the installation. Furthermore, some sculptures are constructed akin and similar to the parameters of showcases in lobbies and presentation rooms of foundations and agencies. Ultimately, all intends to show and hint at an insight, but seemingly nothing is on display. And if there were to be objects on display, they would again refer to the context and not the content of 'The Agency'...

*NJL: Somewhat related to the previous questions, I am interested in knowing how and by what means you seek for the conceptual integration between these display structures and sculptures, the overarching agency they are embedded in and come to represent, as well as the context of the gallery space? How do you approach and balance these different scales, agendas, and intensities?*

**WM:** The sculptures based on the premise of the display structure are the representation of the apparatus of carrying, holding, exposing and demonstrating information and data. These structures are often constructed with recognizable features, but they are not functional, they do not operate for what they are seemingly envisioned. My intention is to shift the gaze from what would be expected, to how these structures and mechanisms contextualize these absent contents. Context becomes content.

Most of the time, the objects on display distract us from the mechanisms they are part of. However, it is precisely these vision-inducing mechanisms that influence, even fundamentally shape the ways in which we look at and encounter what is on display. As I do not wish to generalize the methods of presentation, I do occasionally fall back on more thematic interests or specific cases, such as specific museums or sometimes even very articulated exhibition formats. For the exhibition at Galerie Jerome Poggi, I elaborate on the exhibition I had last summer at the Palais de Justice in Poitiers, organized by Comfort Modern.

The project is entitled 'Museum of The Futures', and consists of an installation that represents a museum which could demonstrate potential thoughts on future thinking, as envisioned from a past perspective and by projecting on what different futures might hold. During the preparatory stage of the exhibition, I learned that thinking about the future could be approached from many different angles. Even the understanding of what a future could mean

and possibly consist of is enormously diverse. Thinking of the future is very fluid, and difficult to classify. Nevertheless, what keeps most people going on is to think and consider the futures of, for instance, technologies, economies, societies, religion, living in space...

The show at the gallery will not be that precise on conveying and explicating its underlying and supporting content. Yet, 'The Agency' could be—if desired—understood as an agency that provides services concerned with future thinkings. In this way, the seeming emptiness could perhaps be filled with thoughts, with imagined and projected content. Although this projection of imagined content will have to struggle with the prevailing presence of the display structures.

*NJL: As you have mentioned previously, both zoological and museological display structures are most often devised in such a way they induce vision or steer one's gaze by optimizing the viewing conditions that ultimately facilitate and cater to 'the object of interrogation'—be it an art object or an animal. In the case of your current exhibition, how has your approach to the treatment of display altered in relation to the subject matter at hand, that of the speculative potential of future thoughts?*

**WM:** There is a substantial difference between creating an exhibition environment for a concrete object, an animal, or a 19th century statue, and the reflection on future thoughts. Whereas concrete objects and data have already gained a more embedded understanding and history as to how to be displayed, the presentation of future thoughts is assigned to lesser formulated modes of presentation. Nevertheless, the presentation of the latter also draws back on display forms which are somehow familiar to us, yet, in this case, the display and presentation methods are ostensibly more elusive and sizable. Imagination is key. The potentiality of a future is envisioned through a selection of leads. Within the exhibition, these leads take shape through the overarching context of 'The Agency', the visualization of display cases and the appearance of images coinciding with titles and captions of future related topics. In the aforementioned exhibition 'Museum of the Futures', curator Jill Gasparina selected a number of book publications and video documentation on the subject of future thoughts. Some of these titles appear again in the gallery show, ranging from *The Future of the Euro* to *Intelligence Unbound: The Future of Uploaded and Machine Minds*. These speculative titles are presented together with suggestive imagery. Functioning as collages, these constellations of images interspersed with textual fragments deliberately hide explicit content, and instead aim to mimic and allude to the logic of the speculative constructions they often appear in.

*NJL: For the upcoming iteration of the FIAC art fair in Paris, which partially coincides with your show at Galerie Jerome Poggi, you will present a different aspect of The Agency. The gallery will host The Agency's 'consulting office', whereas during the art fair it will foreground itself as an 'exhibition platform'.*

*Could you elaborate on how you proceed to work and react in response to these shifting contexts? To what extent does the work materialize differently, and if so, in what ways? Also, do you consider the presence of an agency, fictional as it may be, as a form of silent critique (through mimicry and method acting) to the commercial and hyper-speculative context in which the agency will then be embedded?*

**WM:** Both presentations nearly have the same title: the gallery show is entitled ‘*The Agency c.o.*’, and the art fair presentation ‘*The Agency e.p.*’. The gallery exhibition approaches the space as a ‘consulting office’ (c.o.), whereas the art fair will be considered as an ‘exhibition platform’ (e.p.). Both presentations take the idea of ‘thinking about the futures’ as their underlying motif. The differences will have to be found in the characteristics of display. Whereas the presentation in the gallery will put emphasis on the presentation of the agency—which, by now, is obviously an agency concerned with futures ideas—the exhibition at the art fair can be considered as a showcase presentation of ‘The Agency’. The gallery booth at the art fair could occur as a booth on a fair about the future. The sculptural work which will be shown there could be seen as a display apparatus that announces a new perception of the future, without being very obvious about whether this concerns a new technology, a new way of understanding biology, or a newly envisioned idea of a future society.

Indeed, the set up of The Agency’s booth at the fair benefits from the given context. Thousands of people passing by, booth by booth, in order to discover what has been put forward by the galleries. Strategies and mechanisms to catch the gaze of passersby are found in abundance. ‘The Agency’ makes no exception. It is there to sell its view on the future. Even if it is not clear whether this future idea has economical, political or social value.

**NJL:** *Perhaps as a final question I am curious to know from you, as someone so engaged with and dedicated to the mechanisms underlying perception-making, innovations in presentation methods, and vision-inducement, what do you think about the future of display, its potential development in the frame of art?*

**WM:** I am not really an innovative future developer, but I am certain we are facing, so not to say we have just started, a challenging time of new technologies which will rapidly change our understanding of perception. I think the distinction between display and art objects will be less outspoken. Understanding display as a far-reaching tool, it will one day have to merge with both content as well as institution. Sounds speculative, but that’s what the future is...