

New Limbs
by Harry J. Weil

Harry Weil: Your last name looks crazy for an English speaker to even attempt to pronounce.

Alexej Meschtschanow: A single Cyrillic letter ‘?’ is transliterated in German with ‘schtsch’. The Germans are very precise. So instead of a simple name I’ve got a password of ten consonants and three vowels. In the age of permanent research for digital information, it may be practical for the perfect attribution.

HW Your work is similarly hard to pin down, a cross between sculpture and installation.

AM Classification is separation, and I don’t feel comfortable identifying as either a sculptor or an installation artist. I see my work as a whole. My exhibitions usually start with a title, a narrative method. I am using not words, but solid materials, and the product is not a poem, but a stable object. My main concern is the image I create in the mind of the viewer.

I make all the metal fixtures for my work myself. When I tell others this, they are often shocked. “Wow,” they say, but only because they don’t know how metalworking really feels. The dust, the noise, the smell of hot oil, all this is alien to most of the intellectuals I know. The feel of the material is liberating; it pulls me out of my cultural and social routines.

HW The metal fixtures can be read as prosthetics, extensions, supports . . . but they are also like corsets that restrict the furniture’s movement and function.

AM At first sight one easily recognizes an aiding gesture in the way I treat this furniture. The round, mostly white steel pipe often appears to the viewer as something medical, and the doctor is your friend who has sworn to the Hippocratic oath. Yet, you might wonder why I take care of the chairs at all, for none of them are actually broken. Under my treatment they are declared vulnerable and their coherence is questioned. This results in an impression of incapacitation or deprivation of liberty.

HW So does the function of the furniture remain the same? Or are they removed to the realm of art?

AM Objects produced by man cannot be merely functional. In each and every object the human being implicates his or her intelligence (and sometimes stupidity), psyche, political opinion and current mood. Everyday objects have, besides their functionality, the quality of a psycho-graph. I don’t deny anyone a chance to sit on my chairs, but once they have people rarely want to do it a second time, believe me.

HW Some of the chairs are old, others are industrial, and there are some that have a Victorian flare. How do you choose them?

AM I look for objects where I find a flaw—an imperfection, a misconception. A squiggly Victorian chair cannot express the dignity of its owner. However, the idea—whether it is stated in a philosophical or primitive manner—that property is a means of self-representation still persists today. To state another example, when Bauhaus objects were new in the 1930s, the impact of the sterile character of this furniture must have been much more powerful than nowadays: it required a completely new viewing habit.

All of a sudden apartments were made to look like hygienic operation sites, in which the freight of recollection could be removed from the brain like a tumor. Now rust intrudes into the indestructible chrome of the steel pipe, the varnish crumbles, and the perfectly sealed wooden surfaces weather. The revolutionary, stiff steel pipe frames have become old pieces of recollection themselves.

HW Oliver Kossack, writing for your artist book *The Birth of the Hygienic*, suggested the relationship between the old and the new as elements that can “function as a symbolic expression of frustration,” but when I look at your work I don’t see this irritation so clearly.

AM “The relationship of mutual control between the old and the new (element) may produce energy blockages as a metaphor of frustrated expression,” says Oliver Kossack (an artist, whose work and writings I highly regard). My chairs are not agitated, as the potential for conflict is hardly visible in the depictions. When you see them live it becomes a bit more evident: they hang completely powerless a few inches over the floor. Being human, you automatically imagine your own weight on top of the chair. At the point where chair meets frame is a screw mechanism that literally puts pressure on the legs of the furniture, tighter than handcuffs and without any free space. This is especially true with the chairs, which are subjected to a perfidious torture in the name of harmless modification—a painless torture. My hope, however, is that you don’t notice this right away, but over time.

HW Are these works readymades in the Duchampian sense?

AM If I merely had to transport all these beautiful objects that I find to a white cube in order to present them there as art, I would die of boredom. If my work didn’t include mechanical additions they would be indeed just readymades in the Duchampian sense, which was a great idea a hundred years back.

HW Your furniture pieces teeter between the handmade and the conceptual, bringing to mind Walter Gropius’s statement that there is a need to “create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist.”

AM There are more and more people who let you know that they are artists, followed by a tremendously insinuating gaze. But I also can imagine the strangeness of meeting the so-called “craftsmen” who studied under Gropius. And now, the people who populate the super-functional mini-living-units that the Bauhaus pioneered, who are they? Certainly not the designers themselves. There is a barrier, arrogant or not, and Gropius cannot nullify it. It does not trail between craftsman and artist, Jew and German, or straight and gay, but between vital and resigned, bright and dull, viable and non-viable, even between being patronized and patronizing. When you are empathic, this barrier runs through yourself. That hurts, and one has to learn how to deal with it, regardless of what kind of job you are doing.

HW So is the Bauhaus an influence on your work?

AM It is not interest in the Bauhaus that motivates me. From the beginning, I have been interested in the conflict between emotional freedom and the necessity to function. The Bauhaus tried to endow functionality with a religious significance, to marry the mechanics of everyday life to the soul: this kills two birds with one stone. I cannot get around this fact in my work.

HW Two of your pieces seem to pay homage to the Bauhaus: *Der neue Knopf* (2010) and *Einem Dadaistisch Beklebten Frauenkostüm* (2010), where you attach metal pipes to glass-plated images of Johannes Itten and Rudolf Lutz.

AM They are two opposing representatives of the same cause. Itten is this self-confident, choleric grand master who was feared by his students. Rudolf Lutz only is represented in a fragment of the archives; maybe he was mentally too unstable to continue to rationalize the ideals of the Bauhaus (this is pure speculation on my part). Currently, I am working with a selection of images of young people that have nothing to do with Bauhaus. They are pictures from the 1950s and '60s taken in courthouses, offices and hallways. These young people hold documents in their hands that supposedly confirm they have taken the next step in their career. I wonder what will become of them: Itten or Lutz?

HW I want to come back to your new work a bit later. First, in the two pieces with Itten and Lutz, the glass plates are cracked because of the stress caused by the screws used to attach the metal fixtures.

AM First of all, I crack the glass because it looks nice. Cracked glass actually forms a decorative element due to the nature of the material. It is something like a mosaic . . . In every soap or midnight thriller, the portrait of the lost love, the bad guy, the abducted child—what have you—is portrayed by mysterious or affective extraneous forces. It is a trick that is popular, cheesy, and accessible to everyone. I want to show my solidarity with these cheap products of culture for the masses. I just do it a bit less aggressive—more emotionless and controlled. I am not interested in the dramatic, but in the contemporary aspect. Identities that are not partitioned hardly exist anymore: these days every individual is a mosaic.

HW Speaking of individuality, I am curious to know more about your exhibition *A Change Of Scene With No Regrets*, where you installed a large number of reproductions of children's doll heads.

AM In May of 2010, I was invited to put together an exhibition in Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina, a country that just 15 years previously had been torn apart by war. I wanted to reflect trauma that visitors to the gallery space would have experienced. I felt that my furniture pieces would not do the job, so I made what seemed like a countless number of children's faces—as many as I could produce locally during my stay—in all different colors: pink, yellow, red, gold, metallic, etc. Masks of children's heads were popular in Germany during the 1950s, a time, like in Bosnia, when Germans were still recovering from a long and bloody war.

HW How does this project relate to your other work?

AM Perhaps there are parallels. In both the furniture pieces and this project with the masks I find an object or a psychological issue that seems in need of repair and manually add something to it, like a horseshoe to a horse's hoof or a splint on a broken arm. Sometimes I do that quite honestly, sometimes ironically, sometimes cynically.

HW I want to return to your recent exhibition at Klemm's in Berlin. You briefly mentioned that you are using photographs of young people holding pieces of paper.

AM The show is called *Dawn Brighter than Day*, and it focuses on socially triggered moments of happiness. I do not care who is in the pictures, what matters is what can be seen as a viewer: a teenager holding a piece of paper in her hand, resplendent with joy and amazement. What is she holding? A record deal? A lease for a cheap apartment in the middle of New York? A role in Warner Bros? Unexpected scholarship to study at Oxford? Employment at IBM? The reality, however, is that happiness is never permanent, yet glimmers of happiness always shine through the bleakness of human existence.

HW Are you shifting away from furniture completely?

AM No. I will not leave my beloved furniture. My work is like a snowball, as time goes by, new things form the visible surface. Everything is underneath at the same time. The past can always become important again.

HW We keep turning to this conversation of the past. But how does an artist face the burden of what is going on in the world today? Do you feel compelled to create work that has a political dimension?

AM I strive not to engage with politics in my work, but I cannot ignore the political aspects of the world in which I live. I am a part of my culture, my society. I do, however, ignore the history of art. There are great artists whose work I guess you can claim I am influenced by—but if any artist classified his/her work according to what others have done it would put art historians out of a job!

HW Germany is a hotbed for young artists right now; it's also in the position of controlling Europe's purse strings. How does this changing social/political atmosphere affect your practice?

AM More and more artists are coming to Berlin. *Bar 3, King Size Bar, Smaragd Bar, Cussler* and other artist-pubs are always full, It is not always easy to order a beer; it's getting rather tight! The economic crisis, which is rattling Europe, polarizes us: there is one camp that is all about aesthetics, distance, fun, and market conformity, and then there is the other, opposing camp that is direct and moralizing and focuses on content and politics. Maybe they are not even camps, but two pronounced sides of the same coin. The disoriented "in-between" is something we shouldn't neglect either—there are many who doubt, and go back and forth because each of the poles is too extreme for them. Currently, Berlin is emotionally more restrained than usual, like time is pregnant and no one knows what the baby will look like. Perhaps it will be a cultural revolution that sweeps all of us away, or at least shakes things up.

HW As a Ukrainian in Berlin, have you ever felt like an outsider?

AM The art scene here is so international that my ethnicity is not so special. Berlin is a city of more or less peaceful coexistence. I'm not an outsider; I am one of many. Here you can do anything. The only problem is the 'schtsch' in my name is a little bit difficult for Germans to pronounce.

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