

OVERGADEN.

Between the institution's authoritarian voice and the viewer's subjective experience
Jakob Emdal explores the ideologies of modern exhibition design.

ESSAY

It's All Kippers and Curtains, Fur Coats and No Knickers

By Kristina Scepanski

This florid British working-class expression refers quite pictorially to the dominance of appearance over substance. Buy flashy curtains to keep up with the Joneses - and to hide your secret diet of inexpensive fish. The work of Danish artist Jakob Emdal, however, has both a fur coat and knickers. He reveals the frequently overlooked impact that contemporary exhibition design exerts on our experience and understanding of artworks.

Mode of Excess

The autonomy of art is an illusion. Design is everywhere. The purpose of an exhibition design is not always to intensify the artworks' particular effects, but rather to harmonise all the various artifacts and thereby create a homogenous viewing experience. In some cases the display structures can even outshine the artworks and gain the lion's share of the viewer's attention.

Jakob Emdal's installation at Overgaden has been influenced by the French exhibition designer Jean-François Bodin, who recently conceived the interior of the architectural museum La Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine in Paris. Nicolas Sarkozy inaugurated the museum in September 2007 after almost a decade of renovations, and committed himself "fully to this mission, to give back the possibility of boldness to architecture."¹

In this exhibition Jakob Emdal reveals the frequently overlooked impact that contemporary exhibition design exerts on our experience and understanding of artworks.

However, I would like to claim that the only boldness here lies in the exhibition design itself. The artifacts, plaster casts of architectural elements, figures and portals of French buildings from various eras, are embedded in a 'hyper-interior'² of oddly-shaped pedestals, ox-blood coloured walls and matching sofas. The artifacts, mere reproductions and sad pars pro toto, are being de-

voured by their surroundings. Thus, a museum originally dedicated to French architectural heritage and mastery from the Middle Ages to the present day has in fact become just another example of French architecture and décor that mummifies the objects on show.

These ox-blood painted walls, weird pedestals and furniture are the opposite to and negation of the white cube. This paradigmatic exhibition container was long regarded a neutral spatial context for art objects. But in fact it is not that straightforward, and may not even be desirable. Granted that the neutrality of the white cube is just an illusion, what are we to make of a hyper-interior such as Bodin's? Unlike the white walls, Bodin's design does not try to hide itself. In its dominant presence, it is indeed highly conscious of its role and function. Precisely this consciousness of playing a role, of being more than just a piece of wood, leather or concrete, is what art historian Michael Fried famously identified as 'theatricality'.³ Art objects possess a double presence, constantly oscillating between being a factual thing and a representational sign. Similarly, Bodin's designs evoke a feeling of restlessness, due to the unstable flickering between the state of being a mere object and a signifier.

Gestus

Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theatre is built upon a specific acting technique that he referred to as 'Gestus': the embodiment of an attitude revealed in words or actions. While the classical Aristotelian acting technique was intended to create the illusion of the actor actu-

ally becoming his or her role, the Brechtian approach wants the audience to remain aware of the showing, of the epic narration of the character by the actor. Brecht's aim is the translation of "reality while avoiding total illusion."⁴ The person on stage, in his or her own individuality, becomes a kind of filter or lens through which the attitude ascribed to a character from the



Jakob Emdal, *Untitled*, 2012

play is presented to the audience. Brecht's actors, art objects, and even Bodin's interior designs are all conscious about their pretending, about the fact that they are playing a role. This tension between the phenomenological body and the semiotic figure is substantially dependent on the spectator. There is no in-itself-ness of the object. Its presence is the result of both its own consciousness of staging/being staged and the consciousness of the viewer.

Surface Seduction

Bodin's hyper-interior has a theatrical effect. The exhibition space becomes a stage. Design becomes Gestus. Jakob Emdal's installation takes up a particular architectural structure, conceived by Jean-François Bodin in 1996 at the Grand Palais in Paris, in which the construction of the walls is revealed. Instead of stepping back behind the objects on show, the exhibition design is at least equally conspicuous. This should not be read as the designer's craving for recognition or as a sign of his immodesty, but rather as an acknowledgement of the power of the spatial arrangement that surrounds the objects on display.

In the 16th century, Giorgio Vasari, reputedly the very first art historian, coined the term 'Mannerism' for a style marked by deliberate violations of earlier standards of painting in depicting the artist's ideas, rather than nature. According to Vasari, a drawing embodies an idea; it is the gesture whereby a certain idea or concept is identified in the material world. Vasari's drawing, Bodin's design and the Brechtian Gestus are their physical manifestations.

(Re)presentation

Jakob Emdal's works emphasize their own exposure. Emdal questions the paradigms and the fixity of contemporary exhibition design by appropriating its structures and mechanisms to uncouple them from

Jakob Emdal's photographs serve as insights into the artist's current situation - his interests and ideas, as well as his daily routines.

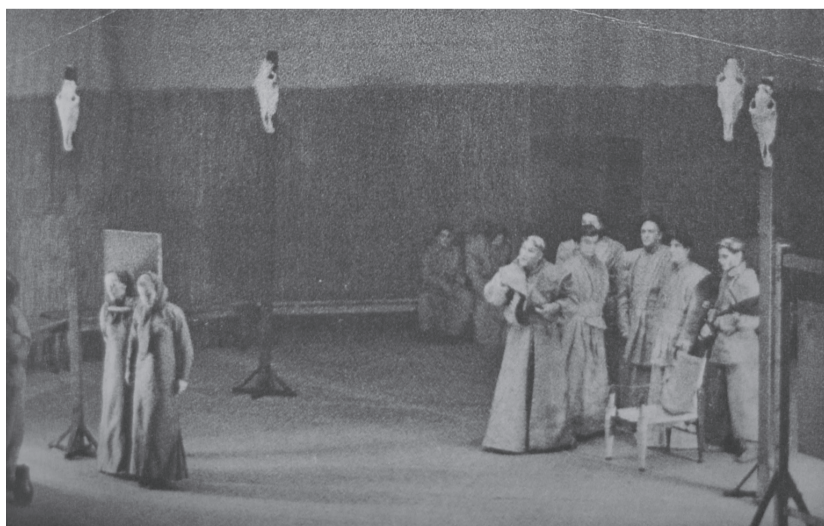
their established significations and pronounce a new, subversive accentuation. Photographs hang from the ceiling, slightly detached from the wall behind them. Their frames, functioning as the borders of the exhibition design, attract attention through their multi-coloured profiles. As a result, it is precisely the distinction between artwork and display, which is non-existent in this installation, that is accentuated. In the Mannerist tradition of Vasari, Emdal's photographs serve as insights into the artist's current situation - his interests and ideas, as well as his daily routines. They do not attempt to capture and mimic outer circumstances in a realistic way. They are embodiments of his current attitude, and as such, they can be regarded as Gestus. Since they operate in the same manner, surface structure and representational strategies are just as important as the content of the actual artwork. No firm distinction can be drawn between the exhibition framework and the artifacts framed. Emdal creates his own hyper-interior by taking over the domain of the exhibition designer. From traditionally being an object of passive spectatorship, Emdal reinscribes the exhibition design with a new set of meanings. It is literally rerouted from its habitual course within established perceptions.

Within the Brechtian theory of epic theatre, this revelation of the constructedness of certain conventions is due to the creation of a feeling of alienation, which is in turn achieved by the acting technique of Gestus. Brecht claims that this ef-

fect can be further intensified by the use of text as an anti-illusionistic device within the theatre. Text usually enters the exhibition in the form of labels, which are meant to enlighten the viewers about what they are seeing. But in fact, a text/image dispute arises - concerning their co-existence as meaningful signs which refer in very different ways to the same intangible entity beyond. In his artistic approach, Jakob Emdal argues that they might as well function as artworks in themselves. In this double presence, they seem to bear similar structural characteristics to the rest of the exhibition design. Originally designed to elucidate, labels merely increase the sense of alienation, since they refuse to contribute to the creation of a perfect illusion. The label is the price tag accidentally left on the fur coat.

Kristina Scepanski is a curator living in Cologne and New York.

1. Elaine Sciolino: "New French Museum Embraces Architecture", in: *The New York Times*, September 18, 2007.
2. Mark Wigley: "Whatever Happened to Total Design?", in: *Harvard Design Magazine*, Summer 1998, Number 5.
3. Michael Fried: "Art and Objecthood", in: *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 148-172.
4. John Willett: *Caspar Neher. Brecht's Designer*, Methuen, 1986, p. 99.



A scene from Bertolt Brecht's staging of *Antigone*, set design by Caspar Neher

By Solveig Lindeskov Andersen, Overgaden

Solveig Lindeskov Andersen

I would like to begin by asking you about the central inspiration for your exhibition at Overgaden. You have mentioned the French architect Jean-François Bodin. What is your interest in his design?

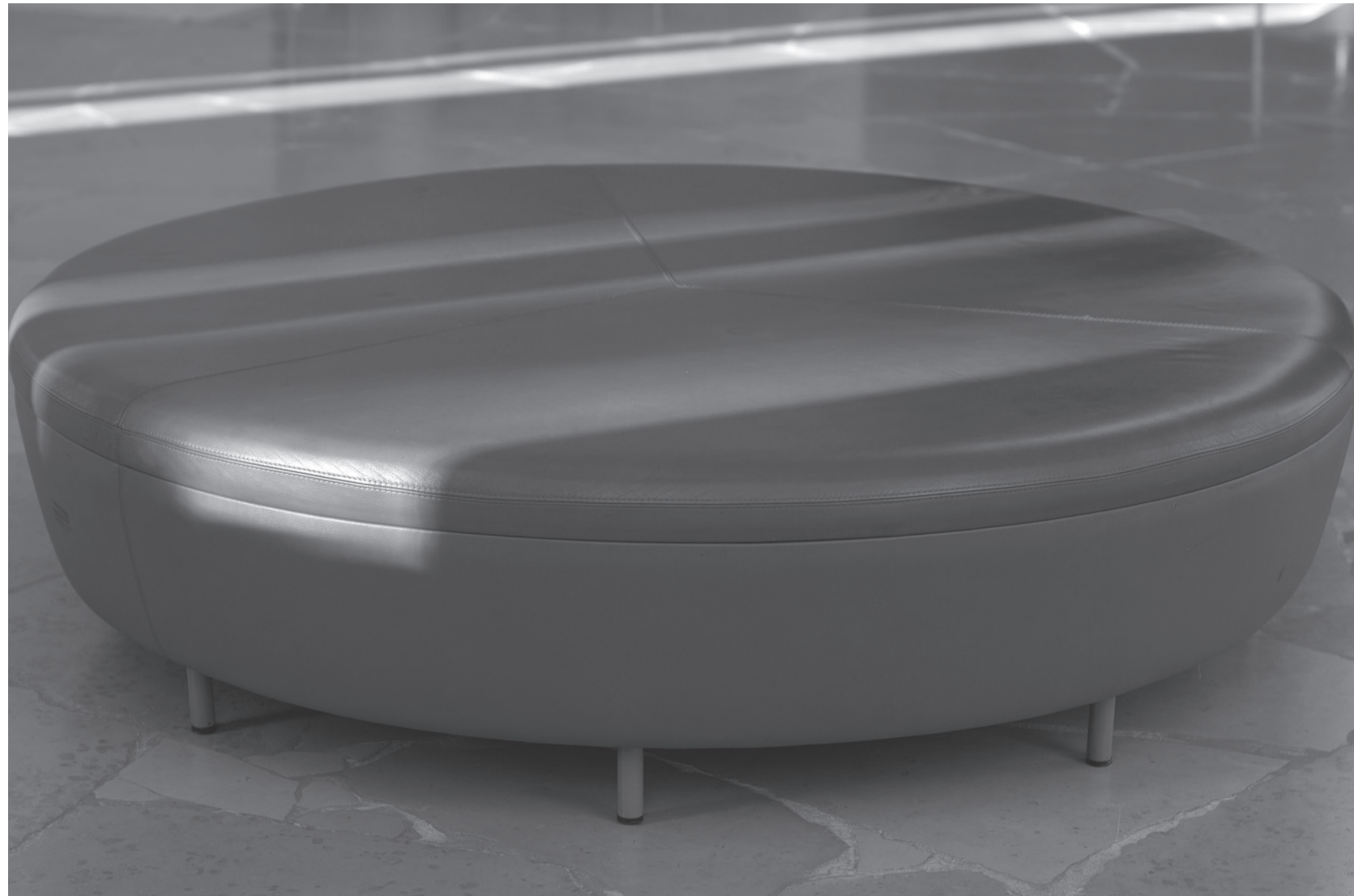
Jakob Emdal Even before I first came across the work of Bodin in Paris, I was interested in a particular form of exhibition design which emphasizes its presence rather than striving for neutrality. Bodin's exhibition architecture for the Palais de Chaillot is one of the most extreme examples of this. It is a kind of 'total design' in which he has designed every single detail, from the furniture to the electrical outlets. I perceive a certain irony in this kind of interior, in which everything has to be identical. It can seem a bit neurotic. In my exhibition there will be various references to Bodin's work, particularly in the largest work, which is a recreation of one of his designs. It is a fragment of a wall system illustrating an idea about compartmentalisation, and encourages speculation that leads in many directions. An interesting aspect of the design is that it is virtually impossible to find any information about the structure or the idea behind it.

SLA *The kind of display structure that you use as a starting point was originally constructed for large museums like the Grand Palais in Paris. How do you relate to the spaces of Overgaden as the context of your exhibition? What effect will the relocation from the grandiose halls of Paris to a former local printing works in Christianshavn have?*

JE For me the room at Overgaden is large, but of course not in comparison with the Grand Palais. It's a question of translating an idea about presentation, and the relocation might reveal something about this kind of staging. When you present paintings in the Grand Palais, you obviously have to give some thought to how you can prevent the surroundings becoming too overwhelming. However, this cannot in itself explain Bodin's strategy, which has the quality of showing everything and, in contrast to the white exhibition room, makes no attempt to create an illusion of neutrality. Neutrality in exhibition design can in many ways be viewed as a contrast to the content. If the background manifests a theory which contains its own network of references, it can make the experience of the actual content unsatisfactory. Conversely, if the neutral background is not present as a common denominator, this must be achieved by working with the content in question, to achieve the right balance. The white walls are sometimes so dominant that they can have an influence on how the art is produced. Some works cannot function without them.

SLA *In the exhibition you are also showing photographs. How do these interact with the wall construction?*

JE The pictures included in the installation have been chosen on the grounds that they do not expand



Jakob Emdal, *Auxiliary*, 2012

the design context, but rather give the impression of an everyday activity that exists in parallel with the clearly constructed nature of the wall. I imagine that the pictures could attract enough attention to become an equal part of the installation, and they have been specially framed so that they can cope with the obviously staged situation. The frames are made of four different types of wood. Besides underlining a kind of realism by making the material context visible, the frames refer to the exhibition's lifetime, as the various types of wood will expand differently and eventually the frames will lose their shape. Additionally, there will be two other photographs that hang on the existing walls which are less intuitive, more conscious about what it is they are representing.

SLA *One concept that you have mentioned in connection with the exhibition is Mannerism - what role does this play in the exhibition?*

JE For me, the concept is associated with a mode of appearance, but it is definitely also a relevant reference to a style in which you borrow rather than create. I see it as a concept that combines behaviour with aesthetics, or to put it a little differently, it reveals a certain behaviour through a medium. One of my photos shows a constellation of electrical contacts in a newly refurbished office building. In this place there was a social code among the employees that was clearly reflected in the infrastructure. Mannerism defines an individual who can operate with ease in any social environment, while pursuing his personal ambitions and preferences.

SLA *As you describe it, your exhibition has two tracks: the highly controlled design track, and a more spontaneous, personal track in the photographs. What is it that arises in the tension between the two?*

JE For me, the design of the wall

installation is interesting because it is both personal and at the same time appears controlled. I associate it with a theatrical set design which challenges the idea of the stage as an illusory space by showing everything. This might not be the truth behind the original design, but there is an idea and an attitude in it. My pictures may help to create a new interpretation through their informal content. I have not yet made the final selection of pictures. It will be a new process to find the right combination, and it will be interesting to see what arises during the installation.

SLA *Does that mean that there is an element of revelation in the exhibition or the wall construction in itself?*

JE Yes, that's how I interpreted the original wall construction. It contains a truth about staging, and possibly also about the art on display, inasmuch as it to a very large extent points back at itself. A special state arises when you look at something without quite being able to place it within your familiar references and associations - an uncertainty that forces you to see from a different perspective. In this way, abstraction can communicate a form of truth.

SLA *In association with the exhibition, you are setting up a sake bar for an evening. How is this intended to fit into your work with the exhibition and its themes?*

JE There is no special theme that connects my exhibition with the sake evening. The link lies in an observation of the significance of form, and that is what will be transformed into an event. The presentation of an exhibition has a significant influence on how receptive the viewer is towards an experience. Similarly, as I understand the sake drinking culture, the form and material of the drinking vessel are of great importance to the way in

which the drink affects the taste buds and is expressed. You have to be receptive towards the experience if you want to experience its essence.

SLA *Finally, could you say a few words about how the exhibition relates to your artistic practice thus far?*

JE Everything I am showing at this exhibition lies in continuation of my previous work, which mainly consists of a series of photographic ex-

ercises. When I work with three-dimensional objects or text, there is always a photographic parallel. The picture frame's importance is also an element that recurs in my work: a mediator which, together with the content, has its own references and relationship with the context. It is an architectural element that plays a significant role in the historic exchange between artists and architects.

The interview was conducted via email in January 2012.

CV

Jakob Emdal (b. 1982) is educated at Städelschule, Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Frankfurt and Cooper Union, School of Art in New York 2005-2010. Solo exhibitions include *Somber Tones* in Schaufenster, project room at Kunstverein Düsseldorf, 2010, and *Force Majeure* at Frankfurt Presseamt, 2010. His work has also been presented in several group shows, including *Correspondence* at Yafo023, Jerusalem, 2010, and *Frankfurter Positionen* at MMK Frankfurt, 2006. In 2011 Jakob Emdal received a research grant from Hessische Kulturstiftung, and he currently lives in Paris.

SAKE BAR

Thursday 23 February at 7.30pm Jakob Emdal invites you to an evening where neither distance nor passivity is required. The interplay between form and content will be measured by a specially designed sake cup of porcelain and three variants of Junmai Sake.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 13 April 2012 Overgaden presents the exhibition *Tingen - From the Greece Gropers Foundation* by Jeuno JE Kim and Lasse Krog Møller. The last day of the exhibition is 3 June 2012. Concurrently, Overgaden has dedicated the top storey to a number of brief projects and longer events that under the title *First Floor* present aspects of contemporary art that are rarely offered space in the more established institutional contexts.

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Translation: Billy O'Shea

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