



Das Wunder des Lebens. A big, radical work by Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys

by Lucas Gehrmann

Following the most comprehensive exhibition to date by Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys in the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA) in 2013 where, under the title *Optimundus*¹, all art genres from artist duo's extensive production were presented – video and photographic works, sculptural ensembles, drawings, objects, installations – the artists were eager to create a site-specific installation for the biggest exhibition space of Kunsthalle Wien: “The radical architecture of the Kunsthalle in Vienna – a huge concrete hall led by strong cold light – triggered a more radical approach. So not a number of works but one big work that is as radical as the space.”²

This work was ultimately titled *Das Wunder des Lebens (The Miracle of Life)* following a long process of thought and development that brought forth diverse ideas and designs. To begin with the artists did not explicitly declare it to be “radical”, just as it does not immediately reveal itself to exhibition visitors as “one (big) work”. That's because this assembly, taking up an area of around 800 m² and comprising five large-format sculpture objects and 40 massive-seeming partition walls that bear a total of 358 drawings, together with an accompanying audio guide, simply resembles the classical format of an art exhibition too strongly. It's only when one takes a second or third look that this impression begins to be undermined: everything here is white, from the partition walls bearing the pictures through the exhibited items to the space itself. Everything is bathed in the same bright light, which makes no difference between art and exhibition architecture – which for its own part follows a unified, strictly symmetrical plan. And the only sound to be heard in this hall is uniform as well: an unmodulated and toneless drone produced in unison by *De Drie Wijsneuzen (The Three Wise-Noses)* – as the fountain sculpture placed centrally in the space is titled – by means of water jets and steel-edged basins. This generally inert and lifeless overall mood is matched by the statements in the audio guide, in which a computer-generated male voice speaks a single sentence about each individual drawing, with each sentence guaranteed devoid of any hermeneutic or even emphatic dimension.³ This in turn corresponds to the character of the unframed pencil drawings affixed to the partition walls: free of gestic virtuosity, in a plagiaristic mode they present us a white-grey cosmos of supposedly trivial objects and scenes.

So it seems that hardly anything is shown or communicated of “the miracle of life”, nothing that could promote our education or even be an object of admiration. Or does this work by the two artists just show in a “radical” way that life may at best be wondrous but hardly wonderful when it comes to people's quite “normal” civilized, social and political life? This sub-aspects of the universal theme of life are certainly represented abundantly in the presented drawings, be this in the shape of pots and pans, sunglasses and crockery, motor vehicles, weather maps, laundry bags, men's shoes, groups of people, bomber jackets, painter's buckets, electric buses, dog obedience schools ... not to mention recipes for chocolate spread and cheese dishes.⁴ With regard to the latter, Jos de Gruyter told me that Harald Thys has a great passion for this, just

as he and his brother Erik have developed an “almost obsessive love of the automobile” since their childhood, or to be more precise of good car design, because “the brothers are interested in the beauty of the car, the aesthetic appearance. You’ll never hear them remarking on the performance of an engine, for instance ...”⁵

Personal passions of this kind are however never “lived out” by the artists – and this applies not only to *Das Wunder des Lebens*. They strictly refrain from any subjective valuation of the things and phenomena they offer for our consideration. Just as the drawings themselves lack any individual style that differentiates each subject, so the subjects are not subject to any form of hierarchical order within the presentation system. The installation architecture with its picture walls, appropriately called “blocks” by the artists, form a uniform square ground plan that, if you wish, may be reminiscent of the street grid of an urban district or of a historic battle formation or the hurdle course of a dog training school. But the pencil drawings affixed to these blocks are not subject to any visible system or order. Although the variety of the depicted subjects and scenes, together with the numbers applied to the top corners of each side of the walls, may remind one of a pictorial encyclopaedia that conforms to an index-like ordering system, not even the audio guide – which leads the visitor from number to number, from partition wall 1 to partition wall 80 – provides confirmation of any logic.

“The ordering does not follow any content-related concept, but instead a random principle,”⁶ was an observation made as early as 2010 when a comparable accumulation of drawings was exhibited under the title *Projekt 13* in Kunsthalle Basel. At the time the artists attributed this “project” to an “indefinable groups of technocrats – a higher authority – who look back at life on Earth and record everything they find.”⁷ Simultaneously the real, concrete production method of the drawings was revealed: “It is interesting to consider the method by which the artist’s personal style is ignored and any distinction between De Gruyter and Thys rendered impossible: the artists drew and traced pictures for hours without pausing to consider their actions. Like machines, removed from their surroundings, they produced as if those higher, genius-lending beings really did exist; the ones about which Sigmar Polke once mischievously remarked: ‘Higher beings commanded: paint upper right corner black’.”⁸

In an email of January 2014 the artists confirm to us this “machine-like” production process of the drawings, and then further remark: “Also the element of trance and depression for us making these drawings like in a monastery (during months in a cave), and the same phenomenon for those who watch 400 drawings is perhaps important to mention. Also the act of tracing each image (following the lines and forms of objects and people – without knowing what will come out = the content is gone, it’s just a vague Abbildung/copy of the original), is an important element.”

In this case there is no (direct) mention of a “higher authority” directing or even inspiring the process, but in *Das Wunder des Lebens* perhaps it makes a ‘personal’ appearance in the shape of *The Three Wise-Noses*, the previously mentioned three-headed fountain. Positioned on high poles in the middle of the block squared, this “elevated” three-element constellation is reminiscent of mythological representations of gods and beings such as the Hindu *Trimurti* – symbol for the conceptual unity of the three-sided cosmic principle. At the same time, the actually very profane appearance of these *Wise-Noses*, which spit out their unchanging tones from a height of four metres, brings us back to the solid ground of the everyday. One exhibition visitor said to me during a guided tour that the small area around this fountain reminds him more of a meeting point in a shopping centre than of any cultic ambience. Indeed, the artists have derived the physiognomy of the mask-like faces from polystyrene heads that they saw in a display window in a shopping street in Germany. Now they have been reproduced on a larger scale from white-painted steel, cast all in one piece.

A text issued by Kunsthalle Basel, where an earlier version of this three-headed sculpture was presented in *Projekt 13*, contains the following remark which is also apposite for Vienna: “The heads also observe the exhibition visitors and return their gazes just as do the figures in some of the drawings. In the artistic work of De Gruyter and Thys this concentration on the act of seeing is a recurring element, which takes on various forms and is present equally in persons, animals and objects: passive, aggressive, sometimes focused inwardly, then again outwards, threatening, frightening.”⁹

The version referred to here featured heads formed three-dimensionally all round, positioned on stepped pedestals and not yet endowed with the function of a fountain. This in turn derives from a design by the artists for an (unrealized) sculpture for a traffic roundabout in a village in eastern Flanders, *De Drie Wijsneuzen van Erembodegem*. What the new version, constructed for Antwerp and Vienna in 2013, has in common with this earlier design is the dualism of passivity and threat, here increased by the waterspout mechanism and the positioning of the object in a space that is otherwise still, functioning so to speak as a central element in control of its surroundings.

Something which is quite new in comparison to the Basel constellation, apart from the “blocks”, is the *White Elements*: four larger-than-life figures made of steel plate cut at right angles and painted white. Standing on pedestals, their ‘faces’ – drawn on paper and attached on both sides to the upper (head) squares – gaze out just above the upper edges of the picture-bearing walls. In this way, with each element mounted in one of the four corner areas of the installation area, they seem to function within the system as guards.

The *White Elements* have the following history: while travelling to the Austrian province of Carinthia, De Gruyter and Thys chanced upon the “White Nights” festival (“Fête blanche”) at Lake Wörthersee, an annual summer spectacle taking place in and around the town of Velden which, according to the Carinthia Tourist Office, is regarded as “one of the biggest ‘in’ events in Austria”. The dress code is strictly white. At the tour of the exhibition provided for the press, a journalist from Carinthia told me that a curious feature of this three-day festival is that the visitors, expensively and stylishly dressed in white and of the category “young, rich and beautiful”, travel around the region in droves in constant search of the “mega-event”, the “super-party” – without realizing that it is they themselves who, with their ubiquitous white presence, are permanently producing this event.

The two artists will also have experienced this scenario as a classic example of the “relationship between the real world and the parallel world” – a theme they have been investigating intensively since at least 2010.¹⁰ And in 2012 this experience then moved them to product a whole series of *White Elements*.¹¹

A special quartet of these is now represented in *Das Wunder des Lebens*. In contrast to the rest of the white series, these four *Elements* also bear drawings on their chest and belly sections: depictions of the interior of a human being – bones, muscles, organs, nerve fibres. In terms of drawing style they are a touch more individual than the work on the blocks, but they wouldn’t pass an expert examination of their anatomical correctness.

With reference to the title of the installation these body drawings take on a crucial role, since they allow a link to be established to its source:

“The presentation is impressive: in a large, almost empty [...] space stands a glass figure, transparent through to the intestines. At the press of a button the organs start to light up and explanations are added from a record player: ‘In the chest cavity we see the two lobes of the lungs.’ This glass figure is the main attraction of the elaborately designed exhibition ‘Das Wunder des Lebens’.”¹² This exhibition was a propaganda show presented in Berlin in 1935, intended to convince visitors, by means of popular-scientific to pseudo-scientific representations and sensational scenographies, of the National Socialist theories of race, and especially the “science” of “racial hygiene”. According to this ideology the German people, defined by the Nazis as a biological unit, should not only be protected from genetic decay through “contamination” of its genotype, but also be bred to a higher level through specific “selection”.¹³

Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys have taken the title for their Vienna installation from precisely this exhibition dating from 1935, which toured through the German Reich until 1942 and was seen by a total of four million visitors. The aforementioned anatomical drawings on the *White Elements* with their intentionally pseudo-scientific nature, as well as the type of diction used in the audio guide, directly counteract the didactics applied by that Nazi-organized show. Indirectly at least, the directness and the purist white of the Vienna installation seems to reflect the fanaticism of purity with which Nazi ideology permeated all its imaginings of body, blood and race, all the way to the “relentless war of cleansing against the last elements of our cultural

corruption” proclaimed by Hitler at the opening of the *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition) in Munich in 1937.¹⁴

There, in the Haus der deutschen Kunst – I am indebted to Vanessa Joan Müller for this reference¹⁵ – paintings were for the first time presented on purely white, i.e. unornamented or otherwise coloured exhibition walls.¹⁶ In this context it is worth mentioning that until the mid-1930s some elements of the modern-functional Bauhaus design were usurped by the propaganda machine of the Nazis, up until the time when Bauhaus was then nevertheless labeled “degenerate” in 1937. In 1935, for instance, the Berlin advertising agency of the (Upper Austrian-born) photographer, graphic designer, exhibition architect, painter and former Bauhaus teacher Herbert Bayer was actually responsible for designing the catalogue and the poster for the original “Wunder des Lebens” exhibition.¹⁷

In the interview with Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys quoted at the start of this essay, Nav Haq is prompted by this and other links between the work of the artists and German history to ask whether they can tell him more about the importance of Germany and German culture in their work. They answer: “Germany and Germanic culture is very attractive for us for different reasons. Language is one of them. We always imitate German when we are working. It’s very relaxing to speak German when you are on an airplane that hits heavy turbulence. Then you can say ‘Ja, das ist einmal etwas anderes, na’ (‘Well, that’s something different for a change’), or something like that. It makes you feel more safe. The show in Vienna is in a way partly the result of this ongoing German imitation game we have. The display of 400 (non)drawings on 40 clearly numbered blocks along with an audio guide, is the result of one afternoon in our atelier imitating an old German professor from Sachsenhausen who had to find a way to present 400 (non) drawings in an effective way.”¹⁸

And so they found their “effective way”, even if we don’t know who this old professor is, whether he exists at all and which Sachsenhausen is meant – Frankfurt, Thuringia or the concentration camp near Oranienburg, designed by SS architects as a “model” concentration camp with its strictly symmetrical ground plan?¹⁹ Perhaps I should ask them myself, but on the other hand this “radical big work” provides in itself as least as many answers as any questions one might ask. And one of the “radical” aspects is also that we learn from this *Wunder des Lebens*, that we learn nothing if we just reproduce or echo what has itself already been reproduced for reproduction’s sake. To consider for instance the *Three Wise-Noses*, if we persistently question their “noble simplicity and silent greatness” we see them mutate from an art and cult object through a piece of shopping mall furniture to an entity of control and surveillance, and then back again, perhaps, to a “memorial to lost curiosity”. Indeed, the three entities have for so long emitted the same unvarying substance with the same unvarying expression and with the same unvarying sounds – and have long since lost their once nose interest in the world and in life.

Perhaps however they simply rely on their audio guide, who explains everything to them before they need to ask any questions. But this certainly *isn’t* the audio guide for *Das Wunder des Lebens*. He, on the contrary, ensures that what Dieter Roelstraete once said about the not always easily understandable language of Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter continues to be true: “We go to an art exhibition to see things that we don’t understand. We are attracted by the fact that we don’t understand them ...”²⁰

Notes:

1 *OPTIMUNDUS: Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys*, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), 8 Feb.–19 May 2013, Curator: Nav Haq, www.muhka.be/en/toont/event/3153/OPTIMUNDUS. As a cooperation between the M HKA and Kunsthalle Wien, it was originally planned that this exhibition would be adapted for Vienna under the title *OPTIMUNDUS II*.

2 From: Nav Haq, “We always imitate German when we are working”. Interview with Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, in: *Metropolis M*, 17. 2. 2014, <http://metropolism.com/features/we-always-imitate-german-when-we/>

3 The video *The Art View – Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys at Kunsthalle Wien* by Christian Zürn (03:26 min, 10. 2. 2014) provides apposite insights and audio examples on this theme, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLrfVr3xNcw and www.kunsthallewien.at/ (sub Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys). For views of the installation see: <http://hahamag.com/jos-de-gruyter-herald-thys-remove-color-miracle-life/>

4 Cf.: Kito Nedo, “Wäschebeutel, Bomberjacken und Käseplatten”, in: *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, 20 Jan 2010, www.art-magazin.de/kunst/25725/jos_de_gruyter_und_harald_thys_kunsthalle_basel

5 Eva Sietzen, “Eine schöne Nacht des Automobils”, in: *Tuxamoon Magazine*, Cologne, 30 April 2008, www.tuxamoon.de/magazine/kultur/kunst/2008/04/30/eine-schoene-nacht-des-automobils/
In fact the automobile also plays an important role for Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys in the conception and development of ideas and projects: “A work mostly starts with a kind of mutual agreement about a certain atmosphere in a situation, or a person, or a scene in a film. Then we make maquettes until something comes out. There isn’t a lot of discussion between us. Car rides are extremely important in our practice, to enter into a kind of trance.” From: “Nav Haq in conversation with Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys on the occasion of their exhibition at M HKA”, in: *Mousse Magazine*, 16 March 2013, <http://moussomagazine.it/jos-de-gruyter-harald-thys-optimundus-at-m-hka-antwerp/>

6 Yvonne Ziegler, “Im Spiegelkabinett der Welt. Jos de Gruyter und Harald Thys realisieren in der Kunsthalle Basel ein Projekt von Technokraten”. In: *Artline Kunstmagazin*, 1 Feb 2010

7 *Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys – PROJEKT 13*. Kunsthalle Basel, 2010, www.kunsthallebasel.ch/exhibitions/archive/88

8 Yvonne Ziegler, op. cit. Note 6

9 op. cit. Note 7. For illustration see: *Kunstbulletin*, critique 3.2010, Isabel Friedli, www.kunstbulletin.ch/router.cfm?a=100226154745GH3-8

10 See for instance Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, *About the Relationship between the Real World and the Parallel World*, Video, 2010. Also compare here: Jennifer Krasinski, “Doubled Vision: Mapping the Parallel Worlds of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys”, in: *Optimundus. Jos de Gruyter und Harald Thys*, exhibition catalogue M HKA, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2013, pp. 9-13, and Peter Wächtler, “Come on”, *ibid.*, pp. 59-67.

11 First presented as a group in the exhibition *OPTIMUNDUS*, M HKA Antwerp, see above Note 1. Illustration see: <http://bortolozzi.com/exhibitions/jos-harald-muhka/>

12 “23. März 1935 – Ausstellung ‘Das Wunder des Lebens’ eröffnet: Entmenschlichung als Propaganda-Schau”, in: *WDR.de, Zeitgeschichtliches Archiv*, 23 March 2010, www1.wdr.de/themen/archiv/stichtag/stichtag5134.html

13 In addition to the promotion of “hereditary health” and “Aryan” offspring, the people defined by National Socialism as genetically defective and non-Aryan were to be reduced in numbers by “eradication”, sterilization and persecution. The first measure intended to achieve this goal was the introduction of laws and create authorities, such as the “Law for the Prevention of Progeny with

Hereditary Diseases” of 14 July 1933 and the Nuremberg Laws “for the protection of German blood and German honour” of 15 September 1935.

Taken here from the German Wikipedia: de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalsozialistische_Rassenhygiene

14 See here: http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1577

15 In conversation on the film *Architektur des Untergangs* by the Swedish documentary film-maker Peter Cohen in 1989, which was shown in Kunsthalle Wien on 18 February 2014 on the suggestion of Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys. Vanessa Joan Müller is the head of the “Dramaturgy” department at Kunsthalle Wien.

16 See here: Walter Grasskamp, “The White Wall – On The Prehistory of the ‘White Cube’” (Translated from the German by Rachel Esner), in: *On-Curating.org*, Issue # 09/11 : Curating Critique, pp. 78-90, www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-9.html#UxX6QvJ5eCk

First published as: “Die weiße Ausstellungswand. Zur Vorgeschichte des ‘white cube’”, in: *Weiß*, edited by Wolfgang Ullrich and Juliane Vogel, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer 2003.

17 “Das Wunder des Lebens”, catalogue for the exhibition of the same name in the exhibition halls on the Kaiserdamm, Berlin, 23 March to 5 May 1935. Editorship Ingo Kaul, catalogue design Herbert Bayer, www.wolfsonian.org/explore/collections/das-wunder-des-lebens-ausstellung-berlin-1935-23-m%C3%A4rz-bis-5-mai-ausstellungshall.

The catalogue pages are reproduced in: www.burningsettlerscabin.com/?tag=deutschland-ausstellung and until 24 February 2014 were on show in the exhibition *Mein Reklame-Fegefeuer. Herbert Bayer. Werbegrafik 1928 –1938* in the Bauhaus Archive Berlin, www.bauhaus.de.

For the role of Herbert Bayer and his Berlin advertising agency in Nazi Germany (until Bayer’s emigration in 1938) also see: Stefan Hansen (Ed.), *Moments of Consistency. Die Geschichte der Werbeagentur Dorland*, Bielefeld 2004.

Incidentally, the musician and psychiatrist Erik Thys used the chapter headings in the above-mentioned catalogue for the text of the six-voice canon composed by him and entitled *Das Wunder des Lebens*, which received its premiere performance during the opening of the exhibition in Kunsthalle Wien on 6. 2. 2014, performed by the Vienna vocal ensemble *Chor im Hemd* directed by Andreas Salzbrunn.

18 *ibid.* Note 2

19 Sachsenhausen concentration camp was built from 1936 onwards by the SS architect Bernhard Kuiper by order of Heinrich Himmler, with the work being conducted by prisoners of several dismantled camps – the facility was intended to reflect the world view of the SS in architectural terms and to subject the prisoners to the absolute power of the SS in symbolic terms, too. The prisoners’ camp, the commander’s offices and the camp of the SS troops were constructed on the ground area of an equilateral triangle.

The architecture of the prisoners’ camp followed a “geometry of total terror”. All the buildings were grouped symmetrically around the central axis and were correlated to Tower A, the office of the SS camp leadership located on the middle of the baseline of the triangle. A single machine gun mounted on Tower A was provided with an uninterrupted field of fire over the 68 prisoners’ huts grouped around the parade ground.

Cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/KZ_Sachsenhausen, with numerous references to further reading.

20 Dieter Roelstraete on the video *The Frigate* by Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys in his lecture “Die Nacht der Dinge” during the 5th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2008.

This video also forms part of the video program in Kunsthalle Wien. On March, 18 2014

Dieter Roelstraete will be holding a lecture on the work of Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys:

www.kunsthallewien.at/?event=63354-vortrag-von-dieter-roelstraete