

Exhibition Notes: Bruno von Ulm & Daphne Vlassis
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"People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does." (Michel Foucault)

It is always tempting, when two artists are shown together, to imagine an aesthetic or conceptual bridge between them. Are they united on the issue of painting's demise? Are they, instead, in dialectic tension on the ability of art to reveal the world? There is an ironic endgame here, whereby it is logically possible, indeed necessary, for everything (something) to be like *or unlike* something (everything) else. When Laurie Anderson was chided by her *Village Voice* editor for mentioning Jackson Pollock too often, saying "They can't all be like Pollock," she filed her next review with a first sentence that started this way: "Unlike Jackson Pollock ..."

So there seems little validity in trying to forge a connection between Bruno von Ulm and Daphne Vlassis in this, their first, and perhaps only, joint exhibition. And yet, I find myself forced to think about the connections as a function of sheer proximity, and then these merely physical propinquities seem to generate conceptual links as well. The links are, to be sure, contrastive – it is hard to imagine two positions on life and art that are more diametric to each other.

Vlassis' rescued drumheads, with their poignant traces of wear and former life, offer a vibrant counterpoint to the dark vision of von Ulm. Like the apparently random objects that feature in some of Bruno's installation pieces, these found objects bear the deep scars of their former existence, in this case their sound-making ability, the way they marked time in the service of music at large. Now, reduced to (almost) two dimensions, their sound spaces are gone – reminding us that a drum, like a building, is mostly empty space.

We can think of these things now in terms borrowed from Heidegger's meditations on equipment, the thing, and the artwork. The drumheads have been ejected from their entanglement in the world of meaning and music, where they worked to create aesthetic possibility precisely by being *ready to hand*. There is no more graphic depiction of the equipmentality of things than the pre-concert set-up of a drummer's kit. A guitarist is, by contrast, a gypsy of musical use; he or she can roam the stage to the limits of the amplifier cord. Drums must be within reach, and their materiality forever being emphasized – we beat them, like children or beasts, to force a

sound-result. A drum without its space is just a jumble of pieces, a broken assembly with no ability to contain.

But who are we to assume that the drumhead wants to be part of a container? Yes, the poignancy is there – we no longer make sound or count time! – but maybe there is a kind of weariness too. Is it possible that a drumhead wants at some point to retire? Now they bear suggestive sketches on their marked flat surfaces; they are hung on the wall, their circular individualities almost spin in the imagination creating curious mandalas. Meaning is elusive without the larger framework of use – but perhaps the sense that it is *not* elusive, that we know what we are doing when we use things, beat them – is the larger illusion. The drawings on paper exhibit the same slightly mysterious sense of promise; they feel like shape-shifting blueprints of districts, monuments, factories, or cities that are never to be built. Small sections almost resolve into a recognizable pattern, but then morph and twist in a way that is somehow a subtly shaded, simultaneous salute to all of High Ferriss, Rorschach, Möbius, and Escher. The paper itself is tactile and variant, apparently fragile but in fact tough with a high-fibre weave.

Vlassis' work, in short, though it may seem less than vivid with its monochrome ink drawings and heavily worked-over materials, is suffused with *joie de vivre* and a sense of hope. Even the rather disturbing self-portraits shot through a drum skin, which show irregular shapes with apparently erased faces of terrible deformations, acquire, in their numbers, a Frankensteinian charm. Yes, these are monsters! But they are monsters possessed of a certain inarticulate tenderness, a touching luminosity, beautiful freaks arrayed in a potentially endless portrait series.

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Across the gallery floor, life is not a suitable subject for celebration. Von Ulm's celebrated nihilism, his neo-Nietzschean darkness, is worked out in a series of works that are funny, nasty, disturbing, and ironic. We sense the aura of Bruno on the gallery floor, smiling wryly at our presence. Why are you here, friends? What do you hope to gain by travelling to this destination and standing in the presence of these objects? The suggestion is not quite that the joke is on us – the artist mocking those who seek his "insight" for their fecklessness and credulity. It is more general, and more personal, than that. Bruno is aware that the main joke is on *him*, not us.

The background conditions for this cheerful despair are rooted in the art-world philosophies of Arthur Danto and George Dickie. The arguments are well known.

Danto's article "The Art World" (1964) inaugurated a generation-long discussion concerning what we came to call the "post-historical" context of art making and spectating. How do we understand an art world where any object, no matter how mundane or benighted, might be regarded as the proper object of our aesthetic contemplation? Danto wrote, famously, of Warhol's Brillo Boxes, but the question pre-dates Warhol in the form of Duchamp's "ready-mades" and other challenges to the "high" art norms of accurate representation and conscious creation. Danto's argument is that we cannot know in advance which new features of an art work – maybe "art intervention" is better – will fetch our attention. The "discursive space" of the art world is where the intervention will be made, and either taken up or discarded.

Dickie considers this an invitation to an "institutional" theory of art, wherein the only valid answer to the question "What is art?" is to gesture toward the interlocking pieces of the art world as a social network: galleries, curators, art schools, publishing, spectators, and so on. (This "and so on" would nowadays have to include, prominently, merchandising and associated for-sale posters, prints, tchotchkes, t-shirts, and doo-dads.) Dickie's *reductio* of the discursive theory to its institutional version was resisted by Danto and his supporters, who insisted that the art world was more expansive, and more essentialist, than this. Danto insisted that he was really giving a philosophical answer to the question "What is art?", not merely finding the question meaningless except in relation to other facts. Dickie responded by complaining that he never found the replies convincing.

The details of this dispute need not detain us, except to appreciate the stakes. Danto's art heroes open the door to an art world where literally everything is up for grabs. Dickie responds by noting that, whatever the protestations, this cuts the ground entirely out from under any attempt to say what, in essence, art might be. Later theorists, whether they are institutionalists or not, largely abandon the "What is art?" question altogether, preferring in one version the so-called "buck-passing" theory of art. Philosophers are not in the business of saying what art is; art is whatever specific artists and their audiences are talking about. Thanks for nothing! Or rather: no thanks for everything!

Now what Bruno perceives here is the dual nature of this development. For every artist who viewed the art world thesis as an escape-hatch, there was another – maybe many others – who were forced to regard it as a trapdoor. Anything that can get in also means, too often, that nobody can get out. Some continue to chase after novelty, or jarring use of materials, or unsettling subject matter; others create experiences, interrogations, disputations; still others effect "returns" to beauty, or

representation, or amusement. But Bruno's amusement is a function of *your* presence at *his* show, the unspoken, weird complicity we all display when we so gather. Why, after all, are we here? What do we seek? What do we imagine we will find in the gallery? Recent theories of "relational art" will not help us here: we are not engaged in some sort of community action, or even an enlivening sense of alienation, a jolt of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. No, we are simply wandering the space, as if wandering in an oddly decorated platform in expectation of a train of thought that, though repeatedly announced, never arrives.

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The lesson here is a subtly brutal one about corporeality, presence, and meaning. The works are forever implicating the viewer's body in the space, whether in the form of empty overcoats or the unbuilt Ikea-style do-it-yourself gallows. Equipment again, but now not Vlassis' joyful silence-after-music, but an unsounded dirge or, worse, the goose-step stomps of a military parade march. Figures appear in the drawings, often distorted and nightmarish, but also apparently vanishing before our eyes – the body in its many styles of disappearing, being physically negated or reduced to bones and dust. The body is, after all, the most fragile and vulnerable vessel of meaning we know. Our individuality and memories, all the things that matter to who we are and what we know and loved, are only so much brain matter. Our unique experiences are destined to be lost "like tears in rain," as the doomed Nexus 6 replicant Roy Batty says in *Blade Runner* (d. Ridley Scott, 1982, played by Rutger Hauer). Incept dates and termination periods may vary, but of course we are all doomed in the very same fashion.

So we have traces in these works of various bodies that were, or might have been, but which now are gone forever. Chewed gum, dense with DNA, is used as a plastic material in its own right. A table at which nobody is seated stands in a topsyturvy array of "protective" floor casters, plates heaped with rotting food. A man's suit is remade in a fashion that subtly interrogates the normative assumptions of sleeve, cuff, trouser, and jacket. Most disturbing of all, at least to some, will be the pair of off-white canvasses, seemingly reminiscent of Cy Twombly or Robert Ryman, but then revealed as found material: sections of "protective" tarp used in the transport of herd animals to slaughter. Cut, stretched, and hung in the approved art-gallery manner, these "paintings" are obviously meant to unsettle, but also to irritate. We have seen this kind of cruel jape before!

Yes, we have. But given Bruno's background and history, I think we are driven at this point to try and understand these works against the still lingering memories of the concentration camps, the "rational" transportation and disposal of bodies under the sign of purity. And these, ironically, are memories and associations that we might wish to vanish more quickly, rather than lingering now for decades, indigestible and insistent. The body is once more implicated in its combination of presence and absence. Elaine Scarry has defined war, specifically combat, as the pursuit of political ends by means of the alteration and destruction of human tissue. The Holocaust, in common with any genocide, is merely the logical extension of this insight. The political end and the tissue-destruction are no longer related as an independent end and the means thereto, but are instead conjoined as the one and the same thing.

I think, too, of Agamben's dense meditation on the Dim stockings advertisement, with its display of synchronized female legs dancing in the trademark hose, and how this mechanized, commodified de-naturing of the body is intimately bound to the forces of capital, mechanization, and finally death. Eros, desire, and beauty are, as it were, just along for the ride. But the final mechanization is of the image itself, not the body. In an important sense, the body can no longer even be present to be touched.

"Thus the glorious body of advertising has become the mask behind which the fragile, slight human body continues its precarious existence," Agamben writes in *The Coming Community* (1993), "and the geometrical splendour of 'the girls' covers over the long lines of naked, anonymous bodies led to their deaths in the *Lagers* (camps), or the thousands of corpses mangled in the daily slaughter on the highways." This spectacle of the spectacle separates the flesh from its own presumed meanings; but Agamben proffers hope of a new "whatever body": "Advertising and pornography, which escort the commodity to the grave like hired mourners, are the unknowing midwives of this new body of humanity."

Well, maybe; meanwhile, it feels all too much as though we remain trapped inside the spectacle. There is, of course, no saying that this outcome is worse than the Holocaust, but it is more generalized. In a devilish twist, we could even say that the purveyors of the Final Solution, like the powers governing Kafka's prison colony, *take the body seriously* as something to be punished, worked, and exterminated. By contrast, we can no longer even touch our own bodies, or those of another. Under full-spectacle conditions, corporeality is itself a kind of trapdoor: how can we hope to rescue basic physical experience from something so overdetermined and commodified? Thus Bruno joins Baudrillard in feeling the perverse imperatives of

pornography forcing their way into the art world (of course) but, still worse, into everyday experience. We are the unwitting producers and consumers of our own subjugation.

Why should it be otherwise? Bruno's ultimate point might be precisely that meaning itself is just as fragile, slight, naked, and anonymous as any violated body piled ready for cremation, or lifted from a shipwreck or highway crash. Meaning is a function of the vitrine in which it is held for view – language or gesture or object upon the wall. Break the container and you have destroyed exactly to the extent that you have liberated. There is no final escape from the rounds of containment and limitation, the transactional exchanges of commodity and attention, because escape is literally a journey into nothingness.

Adorno's notorious line about the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz comes obliquely to mind, in particular because it is so often misunderstood. The true meaning of the quotation is clear only in context. The relevant passage, from a 1949 essay called "Cultural Criticism and Society," is worth quoting at length:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.

To parse this quite typical *cri de coeur* from the master of pessimistic *Kulturkritik*, we must first acknowledge the accuracy of its assessment. Culture *itself* is the barbaric condition, continuing as if Auschwitz had never happened, which had not been indeed a logical product of culture. The "total reification" is the process by which apparently meaningful things are generated without having access to anything beyond themselves, without any hope of future redemption. And thus all discourse, *especially* the darkest, may be reduced to chatter. Earlier in the same essay, Adorno had noted that: "In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one." We are all just prisoners here, of our own device!

Writing poetry now is barbaric not because the pursuit of beauty or formal precision is an insult to the memory of those consumed, but because any kind of belief in the ability of words to mean is an insult to our own intelligence, a bad joke. Whether there is a stage of critique beyond “self-satisfied contemplation” is left as an open question. Adorno’s essay is, like the present one and every other thing anyone has written or created, a tightrope walk across the abyss of failure where the mind is absorbed so completely that it cannot even recognize its own reduction to the hopeless manufacture of empty signifiers. As we would say today: #ultimatefail

Of course, aware of our own fragility and incompetence in the face of reification – not to mention death – we keep on depositing meaning in vitrines we hope are a little sturdier than our own jelly-based minds. We write, and make art, and forge connections; we build institutions, and keep alive the memories of those who have passed from the messy realities of the mortal plane. This is, after all, the only form of immortality we know. This is a series of devil’s bargains that we make with ourselves. Because what else? Perhaps Bruno’s own hopeless half-smile is the ultimate artwork of our confusion, a stamp of cynical approval at the sight of our walking in this space. Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name. Enjoy the show!