

## THE PRODUCTION OF FAMILIES: METHODS AND METAPHORS WITH OLSEN & FISCHLI

(8) studiolo.ch

- How do you create a curatorial duo, what processes of discovery and research are involved in an undertaking of this kind, and how many things can you do out of a *studiolo* in Zurich?<sup>1</sup>

- How does one curate shows that are *inherently* narrative?<sup>2</sup>

- How does one work with an architecture school while thinking as art curators?<sup>3</sup>

- What role can books play in the mental arc of architects (given that the next series of shows will explore the relationship between architectural practice and the "book-object")?<sup>4</sup>

- Why is it important to create families of collaborative projects?<sup>5</sup>

We had all these questions on the table, and we had Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen. I met Fischli and Olsen a year ago, at ETH, the big Swiss school where they work as co-directors of Exhibitions at the Institute of History and Theory of Architecture (gta), producing shows that put ideas into circulation and break up the linear narrative of the educational space: on that occasion they had invited *very different* people to talk about the meaning and direction that architecture exhibitions should take, if architecture exhibitions really *had a meaning and a direction*. Rather than preparing a speech with visuals and a computer, I brought along a sisal backpack full of books and linked together my little train of thought by pulling out very odd volumes, very different from each other: from Leanne Shapton to Georges Perec. Without having said this or known it, I realized in talking to Niels that *this itself* was a miniature architecture show, and in some ways had everything to do with the very definition of "show": semantic objects arranged in a complex manner in space.

Since then a dialogue has emerged with the Swiss duo, who in short order have organized exhibitions and conferences—in part with the precious support of Maja Hoffmann's LUMA Foundation—that are both an *inventory* and an *invention*, and have put their idiosyncratic activity on the most perceptive global map of contemporary culture: from "Theater Objects – A Stage for Architecture and Art," with marvelous works by Richard Wentworth and Andrea Branzi (and many others), to the most recent gorgeous piece by Dan Graham, plus a string of exploits all around the world, and naturally the major Lucius Burckhardt project that brought grist to the mill of the Swiss pavilion at the 2014 Architecture Biennale, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist.

I would have liked to organize this conversation in a tidier fashion. But this is how it evolved—as a storeroom of fascinating objects, while a copy of *The Plan*, Michael Schmelling's book on compulsive hoarding, sat on the table glittering in the sun. That's why I've put the questions at the beginning, and that's why now, like notes to something written in a dream, we have the words of Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen.

<sup>1</sup>FF "In the beginning we thought, 'how can we change things and make a contribution that will be unique from our side?' So it all began, because we were already going to the *studiolo*, a studio house owned by Niels's grandmother Marianne Olsen, as a place to get started. She was an older artist, and she had this beautiful modernist house which was full of her

works, but she was not physically working there anymore. It was in the suburbs, in this peculiar area, where otherwise no art things happened." NO "Yes, it almost felt like a stage set. Then we brought younger artists there." FF "In the beginning there were so many things we kind of had to deal with. And we had to find a solution, how to initiate a narrative of exhibitions."

<sup>2</sup>NO "We consider a narrative drive like a kind of thematic show. It's always been a problematic issue how to deal with the common 'curated', themed show. So it's something that has interested us since the beginning. Instead of thinking about overlying themes, we thought about a general narration within our practice. How one show evolves into the next and vice versa. Working with Bob Nickas—a curatorial legend from New York—was inspiring, as a role model. He did very intriguing shows in the 1980s and 1990s, where he ironically criticized thematic exhibitions by exaggerating this concept: for example, he made a show called 'Red,' presenting only red artworks, and another show called '1969' with just works from 1969. Then together with Nickas we organized '69/96,' a re-enactment and interpretation of his early iconic show."

<sup>3</sup>FF "The wonderful question of working in the school—now as curators of gta exhibitions at ETH Zurich—is who you talk to and what you deal with. And this is kind of what we like about our work in that environment. And the questions are already there. You don't have to start from zero. You have the students out there, you have the professors that are there, they have topics and all the questions, so you can link into that." NO "For this reason we are, in a sense, quite pragmatic. And it's not that we have these crazy ideas that we want to place somewhere. It's rather that we figure out what to do in relation to a specific situation, maybe like architects always have to—their work derives from a problem given by the commission. But obviously when organizing shows there's often no given problem, so we have to invent one."

<sup>4</sup>NO "We've thought a lot about architecture books and are now planning an exhibition with many layers of contributions about how books can serve as a device in architecture. But in the current state of publishing there are also so many books that are done super-beautifully, with lots of money, but the medium is stressed out; it feels they do them just to impress the clients they want to work for, or the school that produces them, because they have to publish, otherwise their research does not exist. So there's also a bit of a crisis, and I think there are even more questions to ask about architecture books, and their status, much more than with artists' books, since their form is more discussed and elaborate."

FF "The great Arno Brandhuber recently told us: listen, the most important book for architects is the book of building regulations. It's the law book. It's the most important architecture book that there is, and it's the only one you need. You can start with that and then you know what you can or can't do."

<sup>5</sup>FF "I really like the family metaphor, because it's not about the family that is always there, it's about the family you want to create." NO "It's totally a family by choice. If you continue to work with an artist, or with an architect, they will lead you to the next problem. And the next exhibition will come out of it. So the narrative of the exhibition also can force new breeding, new generations to come out of the family."

(Text by Gianluigi Ricuperati)

## NICHOLAS MANGAN: ANCIENT LIGHTS

(9) CHISENHALE GALLERY  
64 Chisenhale Road, London E3 5QZ,  
United Kingdom  
chisenhale.org.uk

**Agnieszka Gratzka** For your upcoming solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery, "Ancient Lights," you will be using solar panels to power a film projection. Could you start by explaining how that's going to work?

**Nicholas Mangan** It works in the way that an off-grid system works: the solar panels are exposed to direct sunlight, which is transferred into the batteries that store and provide energy for the equipment and the projectors. It's an autonomous system, detached from the grid and completely reliant on there being enough sunlight on those days.

**AG** And how will you ensure that the projection is continual on, say, a cloudy day?

**NM** We got eco-friendly projectors that use the smallest amount of energy possible so that the actual batteries can store up to two days of energy for what we require. It's a calculated risk. The whole show is about a set of contingencies.

**AG** The energy generated in this way will then somehow be transferred to the gallery spaces?

**NM** A huge wire will run all the way down the back side of the building and into the gallery spaces. The coin film will be in the first room you come into and in that same room there will be a false wall on which the solar inverter and the batteries will be mounted. The longer of the two films will be projected in the main gallery.

**AG** Does the coin film have a title?

**NM** They're both called *Ancient Lights*. I see it as the one work, just a split-or two-channel work.

**AG** Could you comment on the title?

**NM** You live in London. Have you seen "Ancient Lights" written underneath certain windows? It's an old British law called "Ancient Lights," the right to light. Basically, if you've had the sun coming in your window for more than twenty years, it's illegal for someone to block your access to light. The title was a way of contextualizing the work within London, but it opened up to other ideas. The coin film, for instance, deals with the notion of solar variation, the idea that the sun's energy is subject to flux and variation.

**AG** And in what way does the film convey that?

**NM** The spinning coin is like a metro-nome of the sun's energy. The coin is not just spinning in one place; it's dancing around and almost going into its own death throes and then somehow coming out of that again, as if triggered by another flow of energy.

**AG** How did you get it to spin that way?

**NM** It's a secret. [Laughs] I spent a whole day spinning a coin at a studio, using a high-speed camera. Eventually I found two takes where there was a match and then I stitched two pieces of footage



8. "Theater Objects," 2014-15, installation view at LUMA Foundation, Zurich.  
Photo: Stefan Altenburger



9. Nicholas Mangan, *Ancient Lights* (production still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist; Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland; and LABOR, Mexico City. Co-commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery, London and Artspace, Sydney

together. The film brings two laws of thermodynamics together: one is that energy cannot be created or destroyed; the other is that energy can become unuseful—that's entropy. The coin's motion is defying those laws. But thermodynamics is associated with matter in motion, and any kind of movement and motion requires the sacrifice of energy.

**AG** *Your use of the term "sacrifice" seems to connect to the Aztec Sun Stone on the reverse of what's in fact the Mexican ten-peso coin, which endows the whole project with a mythical dimension.*

**NM** I was looking at this mythical understanding of the sun and the idea that loss can somehow enable motion or movement. The Aztecs believed that sacrifice would ensure the sun's perpetual movement. It's something I came across reading Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share*.

**AG** *How does all this relate to the ideas explored in the longer of the two Ancient Light films?*

**NM** The other film touches on what was inspired by the period where people were observing the sun and sunspots in particular. We never stare directly into the sun, and yet throughout history people have spent their lives observing the sun and counting its sunspots. Every single sunspot has a number. Galileo was the first to see one through his telescope. But it was only when the German astronomer Samuel Hendrik Schwabe discovered in the 1840s that there was an eleven-year solar cycle and that the sunspots had a periodical behavior that people started trying to correlate it to other cycles.

**AG** *This ties in with your interest in the research of the Soviet scientist Alexander Chizhevsky and social transformation.*

**NM** Chizhevsky was trying to work out how the sun's activity, the eleven-year cycle and in particular the solar maximum where there are more sunspots, was affecting human behavior. He was not alone. The economist William Stanley Jevons was speculating on the connection between business cycles and sunspots, given that the sun's activity affects crops. A. E. Douglass, who invented dendrochronology, was originally looking to explain the weather cycles through trees; then he became obsessed with trying to follow the solar cycle in the tree rings.

**AG** *What sparked your interest in dendrochronology?*

**NM** It's a reference in *Vertigo*, *La jetée* and this other film called *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* (1966) that features a hand pointing at different rings, relating them to specific events. For me, the tree rings stand for spiral time. This goes back to a very physical idea of cinema as the coiled-up film itself.

**AG** *In the films you have a series of concentric circles—whether it's the image of the tree ring, the bird's-eye view of the Gemasolar Thermosolar Plant in Andalusia, or the Aztec Sun Stone featured on the ten-peso coin. Let's turn to Gemasolar and how it connects up with the other strands. Were you able to film there?*

**NM** The footage with the mirrors is from there. Gemasolar is interesting because it's a new technology. They were the first to ensure a 24-hour energy supply even when the sun is not shining because they store excess energy that's produced during

the day in molten salt. There are eight or nine of them in the States now, but Gemasolar claims to be the first place to have done it. The other reason I was interested in it is that it looked like something Robert Smithson would make if he was still alive. It reminded me of his *Spiral Jetty*.

**AG** *What do you think is the potential of this type of renewable energy? Is solar power the energy of the future?*

**NM** It's the energy of the past. In Australia, more and more people are moving off the energy grid because it's too expensive. And the more people move off it, the more expensive it's going to become for the people who are stuck on it, so in the long run they will have to come over to solar as well. Elon Musk, who invented the electric Tesla car, has recently released in the States this new solar battery that's going to transform our economic relationship to energy by allowing people to live off the grid.

**AG** *Could you talk about how the film was made, in particular how you effected the transitions between the different, almost static shots?*

**NM** There's an interesting point of tension in that. I started with a rule that every piece of footage had to be in motion itself and the only way I could get around that was by using sound. When you see the static image of Mexico City, you hear the sound of the city, that other force of motion. It's either motion or rest.

**AG** *One film is completely silent, whereas the other one comes with a soundtrack.*

**NM** Originally I was going to narrate over this work because there were so many bits of information that were important to get across. But I found in the end that it actually closed the work down. It stopped it from being an example of transformation itself; it just talked about transformation. I wanted to find a way to montage the work together in a way that created an experience, and I felt that the sounds in correlation with the images would operate on a deeper level than narration.

**AG** *If you had to sum it up what would you say is the project's conceptual core?*

**NM** The transformations of the sun, the way it gets into everything.

**AG** *It's a song of transformations, then?*

**NM** That's one way of putting it.

*(Nicholas Mangan interviewed by Agnieszka Gratzka)*

## NINA BEIER: CASH FOR GOLD

(10) KUNSTVEREIN IN HAMBURG  
Klosterwall 23, 20095  
Hamburg, Germany  
kunstverein.de

*The following interview was conducted remotely, using iMessage, on June 1-2, 2015.*

**Chris Fitzpatrick** Your solo exhibition at Kunstverein in Hamburg comprises several series which have been spread throughout the space, mixing them together. What this does is emphasize the continuity and development of those

series, as one issue or concern is picked up and stretched out from one series to another. Was that the intent with the exhibition?

**Nina Beier** We tried to make sense of the relationships between my works, especially the way each piece becomes a manifestation of developing or sometimes stagnating concerns in my work.

**CF** When I think of stagnation I see still water. Your practice is maybe more that of an irrigator's, or at least someone who pours specific amounts of water into crystal wine glasses and then plays sound by making the rim resonate with her finger. In that sense, your exhibition in Hamburg seems more like the structure of a fugue.

**NB** That is a much more poetic comparison! And I suppose that recurring melody can be pretty irritating. Anyway, it became apparent how I keep circling around a confusion between image and object in material that sits between the portrait and the portrayed. The most concrete example of this is perhaps the pressed domestic palm trees I use in *Greens*, where the plant sacrifices its life to become its own image. Or the human hair wigs, which I think are already images in that they are frozen in a hairstyle that will never grow. But as well as being an image of hair, they are of course still actual hair.

**CF** I wonder if it is really an image of hair. Dead people still grow fingernails for a while, so I am just wondering if these flattened things are in some sort of undead mode, in the sense that even a stopped clock is correct twice a day.

**NB** That is exactly the attraction, a material like that cannot escape its own reality and will always be caught in an in-between place. But I think the self-contained object/image relation, and the odd sense of independence I found in this status, brought me towards a fascination with authorless images devoid of intention. Looking at different tropes of free-floating images, free from the burden of message, I find a space for scrutinizing the reality of the image, like any other object, its production and circulation, all the things it cannot escape from representing.

I just made sculptures using the world's largest seed, the *coco-fesse*. The plant is threatened with extinction and is now protected, because its seeds' resemblance to a woman's womb made them highly attractive to humans as collector's items. So somehow the object projects such a strong image of fertility that it has been standing in the way of its own actual fruition.

**CF** Maybe the reason the "assiness" of those coconuts is deemed important enough that the seeds would be so protected shows how inundated we are by an anthropocentric hierarchy.

**NB** If a palm tree grows a female nude, does that make it an artist? Or if a woman lets her hair be harvested, does that make her a field? A handmade rug is traded at a value referencing the labor hours invested in its making; human hair wigs are also testaments of human time, a crop which grows 12 cm per year. A Marxist understanding of value would be tied to the accumulation of time. Time manifested in goods and the determination of value bound to the time needed to produce a specific object. Today, of course, the relation between time and value is rarely connected to blood, sweat and tears, but then again we still value the idea of it.