

## Objects in mirror are closer than they appear

### — On the work of Domas van Wijk

by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

The work by Domas van Wijk is haunted by the ghosts of previous states. Or, in other words still, the work is inhabited by different sources, references and material remnants one may be inclined to ascribe to bygone eras. From the invocation of Basquiat's voice and figure in the seminal film *Downtown 81*, to a reappraisal of *Free Willy*, as well as the displacement of fragments from graffitied walls to their reappearance in the time and space of the exhibition, van Wijk seems to situate his practice in response to a reservoir of readily existing source material. Here it may be misleading to think that van Wijk is driven by sentiment and nostalgia, as bringing these elements to the foreground arguably seem to serve less to engage in a celebratory citation of popular culture and (art) historical referents, but find their inscription in a more open, loose and referential manner. That is to say, in his work one may observe the gradual loss of the objective and the documentary, to its recovery in the key of fiction and storytelling. Upon disclosure, his works manifest as sculptural installations consisting of different interlinking parts—both on the level of materiality and content conveyed. In fact, the two somehow seem to merge. I will return to this aspect later.

For example, let us focus on a recent work from the series *Translocated Fairy Tales* that is enigmatically titled *\*24-09-1976 †12-12-2003* (2018). As a sculptural assemblage, the work is composed of different material elements, among a bass guitar, a television monitor, an amplifier, and a stack of wrapped Coca Cola bottles supporting a VCR player. On closer observation one could start connecting the dots and ascertain that the respective elements are intimately linked to each other, aesthetically balancing between an elusive self-sustaining and supporting apparatus, and a more current invocation of an invented machine one might encounter in Raymond Roussel's literary novel *Locus Solus*. Through an electrical current, the work is put in motion, historicized before our eyes as a *tableau vivant* in which elements are made to adhere and become mutually interdependent with each other: a segment of video tape is running through the VCR, not safely playing from its cassette, but extended meters into the exhibition space where it is looped around the stringed neck of a bass guitar. This stage-setup results in two accidental effects: the VCR is connected to a television monitor that screens—albeit in somewhat distorted fashion—a segment from a *Free Willy* Tape, whereas the bass guitar transmits the sound data of that same tape to the connected amplifier, in turn filling the space with a buzzing white noise. As for *Free Willy*: freedom was never really his choice in the first place. Existential as this may seem, growing up as a (previously) wild animal in a glass tank inevitably informs a cultivated and artificial life in captivity; the paradox of his liberation into a free and open world also leading to his untimely death in 2003. Thereby finding his inscription into the *27 Club*, as Keiko the orca.

Viewed from a distance, the work—as exemplary for his working method and process—instills a feeling of abandonment: a seemingly self-operational and contained system in the shape of a closed circuit or feedback loop that comes full circle without any human interference. Like an archeology of media, we are left with a landscape of humankind's detritus in which objects have taken full charge over their functioning within a scheme of things. Within this scheme objects

are interdependent. They rely on each other to make the organization function accordingly. In the work of van Wijk, objects sit on an equal footing, or what philosopher Levi R. Bryant has referred to as “the democracy of objects”: [...] *flat ontology readily recognizes that humans have unique powers and capacities and that how humans relate to the world is a topic more than worthy of investigation, yet nothing about this establishes that humans must be included in every inter-object relation or that how humans relate to objects differs in kind from how other entities relate to objects. [...] flat ontology argues that all entities are on equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects. While indeed some objects might influence the collectives to which they belong to a greater extent than others, it doesn't follow from this that these objects are more real than others. Existence, being, is a binary such that something either is or is not.*<sup>1</sup>

A key question to be begged is whether this argument can be upheld within the confines of the art field, which could arguably be defined as the cultural field of inter-human energy-exchange, through and by means of objects and processes? On the one hand we cannot simply omit the artist—here personified in the shape of Domas van Wijk—with his artistic intentionality in hand, presiding over but still not fully controlling those objects and relations he puts forward and decides to leave out. That is to say, within the art field there is no mere givenness of things, as objects and relations are charged with meaning and signification, artistic, intentional or not. On the other hand, through the event of the exhibition and the subsequent contextualization of the work, we cannot neglect the dimension of public reception in the shape of visiting human bodies generating added values and deducing meanings on the premise of the constellation the artist has put forward. In summation, although the different objects in van Wijk's installations could be said to sit on an equal footing, it does not yet close the circle in terms of attributed meaning and signification.

When we look at the work \*22-12-1960 †12-08-1988 (2018) and compare it with the previous example we may come to clarify some of the terms obscured within van Wijk's work and artistic practice as a whole. Here one is immediately struck by two blowing blade-less high-tech ventilators suspending a string of video tape midair. With a different aesthetic but similar operation mechanism, the tape is suspended whilst being actively processed by a VCR player, in turn connected to a flatscreen monitor that is positioned on its back on the floor in the near distance. Through a set of headphones connected to the monitor one could perceive a music and the artist Basquiat's voice from the film *Downtown 81*. In van Wijk's work the media objects that are conventionally put in place in order to convey and distribute source material is in turn animated; the fabric of the medium proper is shown as an aesthetic register as to create perception for the intricate movement and artistic potential of utilitarian objects that are commonly taciturn and overshadowed for their serving nature. Their robust material substance and *Materialgerechtigheit* (truth to material) becoming foregrounded and being placed on an equal level with the other texts and speeches conveyed. To that extent, in judging the title of the work, it is interesting to note that in addition to Keiko to orca, Basquiat equally belongs to the *27 Club*, subtly creating a sense of proximity between two works that are not dissimilar in setup but are historically speaking worlds apart in terms of persona and their inscription into popular culture. Or?

Here it could be said that Domas van Wijk is simultaneously embodying the roles of being an artist and the figure of a trickster, creating layers and webs of different interlinking meanings and connections. His work *Leaving Surfaces*, consisting of different pieces of excavated graffitied walls, may equally account for his tendency to appropriate, displace and re-facilitate discussions around (media)objects that are reallocated to the time and space of art, ridden of prior function and signification, and furthermore inscribed into a new field of relations. As trickster-cum-relationship-maker, van Wijk coincidentally instigates synchronicity and proximity between parallel universes; based on happenstance he joins different worlds in which, for instance, Keiko the orca is seen observing the graffiti that was sprayed on his fish tank habitat, now all the sudden linked to his peer Basquiat who was renowned for his early-career graffiti pieces in New York City. By obtaining new insights, van Wijk empirically joins different resources and references that stem from both anecdotal and referential processes of uncovering, bringing them together in sculptural assemblages in which animism serves to prioritize the medium as the message and the message as the medium in equal fashion.

—

1 Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 246.