

## Precarious Conditions

New works from Martina von Meyenburg

A basket made of braided filigree filled with white stuffing material hangs weightless in the air. It is kept static by a DIY rope pulley, but the hovering status-quo appears fragile, as if the vessel might suddenly jerk or fall to the ground. A precarious situation, indeed, of which one wonders: what or who is managing it? Is it an invisible hand or, rather, some abstract system not subject to our control?

With «*Above and Beyond*» (2019), Martina von Meyenburg sets our imagination into motion like the director a film. As with all of her installations, it is made of found objects, simply juxtaposed with other objects of everyday use. Each one is, at first sight, instantly recognisable as a thing of utility: the basket for taking fish out of a water tank; the filling material for upholstery, the rope for tethering, the hook for keeping other elements above-ground. But through her shrewd arrangements they awaken to new life, referring to something other than what they were intrinsically standing in for. Often, they may be seen metaphors for psychological and social conditions.

First installed in the artist's studio in Harlesden, «*Above and beyond*» could almost be overlooked in the plethora of other perfunctory materials: poultry shears, flat irons, pitchforks, rakes, shovels, headless dolls, torsos, legs and arms of mannequins, vices, nets, chairs, old books, needles, porcelain coffeepots, Styrofoam balls, glass – it's a work(shop) of curiosities, organised according to its own hidden agenda. This vast and still growing collection of objects has been accumulated over many years on visits to flea markets and charity shops in Switzerland and England. Each object in residence must have struck a chord with the artist, because she rarely sets out on a finding mission knowing exactly what she is looking for. Rather, it seems, the discarded objects find her.

"They should neither be too antique, nor too new," she says. Mostly, they seem to belong to the era of her grandparents, or that of her parents and her childhood in the '70s. They roughly fit into two categories: items manufactured for industrial use, or domestic objects associated with social gatherings.

Here in this strange realm within a former lighting factory, the artistic process begins, like a jam session or a game. Von Meyenburg plays spontaneously with the objects, testing their material properties, stripping them from their functions and finding new associative possibilities through juxtaposition. Often, she uses string to fix, attach, or tie objects and materials together. She works with their textures and plays with colour combinations (mostly black and white, cream and brown, but sometimes red), until she finds an aesthetically pleasing form and, most importantly, a point of metaphorical resonance.

The use of everyday objects in art, has a long history: from Duchamp to Dada and Surrealism; from Pop to the Neo-Surrealists. Von Meyenburg spins this thread cheerfully onwards. One is first reminded of the surreal objects crafted by André Breton, Salvador Dali or Meret Oppenheim, who also arranged found materials in new combinations that aroused subconscious associations. Breton claimed that mundane things, arranged in unexpected ways, had the power to connect the viewer to the subconscious. The artist's strange

installations do exactly this. They disfigure, displace and de-familiarise objects by showing them in unusual alliances and thus opening up new meanings.

Her own sense of the secret life of mundane objects was perhaps nourished in early childhood, when she regularly visited her grandparents at their 17<sup>th</sup> century house near Zurich, where the idea of maintenance and taking care of ones' belongings (from simple garden tools, ticking clocks to polished silver) was passed on from previous generations. Influenced by her mother's vocation as an upholsterer, she visited flea markets, intrigued by the strange aura of the society's debris; by objects disposed of by their previous owners and waiting for their next proprietor. After her studies in business and a stint in marketing, she completed her art degree at Central Saint Martins where she later wrote a dissertation on «*The Philosophy Behind Restoration and Conservation Within Contemporary Material Culture*».

Zurich, the city, where von Meyenburg spent half of her childhood, is also the place where Dadaists such as Hugo Ball and Sophie Taeuber-Arp left their mark a century ago, opposing bourgeois logic and utilitarianism with works that expressed irrationality and nonsense. Today, Zurich is said to have the highest proportion of psychoanalysts per square mile. Notwithstanding this, on the surface, Swiss society with its love for rationality runs as smoothly as clockwork, thanks to meticulous regulation. It was, after all, the first outpost for psychoanalysis outside of Vienna, under the aegis of Freud's errant disciple Jung, a discipline that tries to order the psyche by unearthing conflicts repressed in the unconscious.

Where there is a shiny surface, it is interesting to dig beneath it and stir up the material world in order to see what emerges. It is perhaps, therefore, no coincidence that Switzerland was a fruitful breeding ground, not only for Dadaists and psychoanalysts, but also for later generations of artists such as Fischli/Weiss, or the pioneering performance artist Manon and Thomas Hirschhorn – who all employed a DIY attitude in order to transform everyday things and processes into art – upholding the Dada legacy of exposing the absurdities of society.

Von Meyenburg's mysterious reconfigurations also evoke the tensions and contradictions between everyday mundanity and the possible layers beyond. If we look at, for example, those two chairs with their abnormally elongated legs turning them into perches, what do we actually see? While the darker one is wrapped in wire mesh and has a shovel attached inside, the white one, with its loose, downward-hanging net, holds a big lightbulb. There seems to be an anthropomorphic quality to the character traits of «These friends of mine I, II» (2019). Their features – metal/dark/hard; fabric/light/soft – seeming to evoke particular male and female characteristics.

A recurring motif in von Meyenburg's work is in fact the gender baggage embodied by our material culture. We see pins, laces, mannequins, baskets, skipping ropes or pincushions, all of them bearing outmoded gender connotations. Take «*Never mind these pins!*» (2019): a flurry of needles shaped into a dangerously prickly ball (held together by an invisible magnet), lies next to a white hand offering a thimble. Needlework kept women for centuries within domestic limits, while they learned to adapt and pass the virtue of patience from one generation to the other. «*Paleness and bloom, pleasure and gloom*» (2019), a wall installation made of dozens of doilies, stiffened with glue and loosely concatenated with

black threads, seems to embody the potential to extend endlessly beyond any imposed physical limits.

A basket filled with hundreds of small puzzle pieces, «*Hundreds and thousands*» (2018), on which a mannequin's hand is placed, tells of stories – once pieced together, now torn apart – and also, perhaps, of (lost) patience.

What these objects have in common is their uncanny effect on the spectator. We may be able to recognise the individual parts, but as soon as we think we have grasped a meaning, our focus is redirected along another referential path. Often, von Meyenburg's reconfigurations of objects are laced up or fixed. Legs and arms are clamped or tied to objects, evoking a state of immobility: caught once in action, but now arrested within clear boundaries. The two arms and hands of «*Hold and Behold*» (2019), for example, supposedly from a child's mannequin or a doll holding a red ball, are clamped in a solid, metal vice. While one of the two legs in «*Here I stand in a jug of peas*» (2019) is immersed in a glass container filled with peas.

The artist is, as she has said, pointing to a universal human condition where boundaries involve the paradox of confinement and, simultaneously, a sense of security, as elaborated by the Viennese philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmanns in his book «*Praise of Boundary*», a book at the centre of von Meyenburg's research.

Although her drawings occupy a similar territory of forced deadlock, they give off a more subtle, tragi-comic anarchism, a dead-pan slapstick that reminds the viewer of Buster Keaton. Gentle-spirited and painted in muted colours, some of them show the drama of the human condition, which is defined by a constant search, be it for balance, for freedom or for self-expression. On small sheets of paper, figures or things are frozen in peculiar contortions. In «*Footprint*» (2019), a foot is literally attached to a flat iron, while the cable is attached to the leg. «*Time Out*» (2019), meanwhile, shows absurdly long arms breaking through a wall, even though they somehow appear still adhered to it. There is in «*Under the belt*» (2018), the impossible situation of a chair lashed to a ball, all four legs spread wide in an awkward attempt to accommodate its spherical shape.

Where the found and distorted sculptures and installations have a massive spatial presence, the drawings strike a more subtle chord. They also evoke a world where life is stuck in complicated situations, but one neatly kept in balance by invisible systems or held in stasis by mechanical devices, resulting in a balance that nevertheless seems fragile. With their delicate quality, these drawings function like ephemeral dreams that disappear when the day breaks and consciousness supplants them.

Brigitte Ulmer

Brigitte Ulmer is an art writer based in London and Zurich.