

EXHIBITIONS

Benjamin Hirte and Chadwick Rantanen at Museo Pietro Canonica, Villa Borghese, Rome

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Ca' means house in Italian.

The "canon" is a set of rules that, according to convention, determines an ideal of physical beauty. The "canon" in sculpture was formulated by Polycleitus in the fifth century. Much more than a statement of rules and proportions, Polycleitus invented a style that integrated the body in movement. In effect, the contrapposto generates a movement of the hips that frees the figure from its archaic frontality. One often forgets that figurative representation already represents a rupture with the non-representational funerary stele. The contrapposto introduced a chiasmus, in other words two lines of opposed directions (the line of the hips and that of the shoulders) and this "twist" generates an impression of movement.

The Canonica Museum, located in the garden of the Villa Borghèse, is dedicated to a 19th century Italian sculptor, named Pietro Canonica.



This museum is a mansion, a house, where one can find the artist's studio, a dining room, a living room and a bedroom. We are simultaneously in an intimate and private space and a public space that can be visited, one that leads by example, but this place is also the little fortress, "La Fortezzuela". Curiously, Pietro Canonica seems to have taken literally a whole set of rules for production and his production was typical of what is usually called "academism".

The place is a collection of the artist's artworks, of copies and reproductions of it, also containing examples of antique sculpture, and in the end, all of this reveals itself to be staged.

There is an uncanny atmosphere in this place, with its tiled floor like those found in public buildings, and we can really understand what Mike Kelley meant when he used the word "uncanny" in his text *Playing with Dead Things* (1). Beyond the gap that exists between the animate and inanimate that Kelley explained so well as he revisited Freud's experiments that led to his seminal text in 1919 and gave rise to the actual idea of the *The Uncanny* exhibition in

1992 can be used to improve our understanding of Benjamin Hirte and Chadwick Rantanen's project at the Canonica museum in 2017. Actually, Mike Kelley revisits the genesis of his exhibition in an interview with Thomas Mc Evilley, (2).

As much as "The Uncanny" was a response to a certain Modernism that excluded any figuration (similar to Kelley and McCarthy's piece *Heidi*, 1992), Rantanen and Hirte propose a confrontational experience between the newer contemporary canons ("post-post-modern") and the model of academic art itself.

What Mike Kelley said in 1993 continues to resonate today:

-TM : "*So the figures you choose will convey this feeling of uncanny uncertainty about the interface between life and death?*"

-MK : "*Right. And the effect is compounded by the fact that, until recently, academic art was forbidden, taboo, in the realm of fine art practice. So not only is there this strange feeling produced by the question of realistic art being alive or not alive, there's also the strange attraction/repulsion to something that's forbidden. Figurative art itself is like a corpse or mummy, and one wants to resuscitate this forbidden thing, bring it back to life. Because it's bad, one wants to make it good again_breathe life into it.*"(3)

The 'genie de lieu', the spirit of the place, is that we feel that *Fortezzuela* is truly a box filled with "dead things" that look at us with empty eyes. It seems that Canonica has produced, with no critical historical awareness, based on commission, portraits of political and bourgeois characters, of children with terrifying gazes, with an absence of any singularity coming from the fact that the canon has been applied with no soul, in other words, a form of "off the rack" academism. The identical white pupils are strangely fascinating. One is reminded of the Village of the Damned (by Wolf Rilla, 1960, remade by John Carpenter in 1995, then again as a television series by Joe Chapelle in 2010) or even the children from the film *The White Ribbon* by M. Haneke (2009).

It is as if the empty eyes refer to a single cast used for all of the eyes of all of the children that have passed through this studio. In English you say "casting at a glance", and this is literally what the configurations of Benjamin Hirte and Chadwick Rantanen propose – and this first glance is deceptive.

Once past the entrance, one discovers a large room in which casts, plaster works and bronzes follow, one after the other, on plinths that are whiter than the sculptures themselves.

On the ground, strange objects, metallic or colorful, seem to be the remains of ongoing work. Are some of the spaces still in the process of being renovated?

A flat metal box covered by a grate is placed in the center, surrounded by noisy, colorful small figurines. The rectangle is missing a corner, as if "bitten" by a curve, and is partly made up of a piece of grating like those that can be seen all around us every day, in the street on the ground or in the corridors of buildings, offices, subways...a type of metal grill that covers electric piping, sewers or drainage ducts.

The piece is placed on the ground but we are not invited to walk on it, like with certain sculptures by Carl Andre. If you lean over it, with its position on the ground inviting us to do just that, you can see small things, tickets and pieces of paper, that raise doubts about the object itself. Is it a vernacular element that has been highjacked from reality and transposed here? A bait to make us believe in "sculpture" but at the same time mocks our expectations of art? The treatment of the metal surface is not that of the "finish fetish" that "minimalist" sculpture has made us familiar with. The presence of small objects that are "rejects from reality" contradicts any attempt to compare it with known modernist forms.

The birds, because the small colorful motorized elements are indeed birds, spread on and around this "plinth/sculpture". They are plastic toys in the size of a pigeon, but whose form and color are those of a sort of idealized psychedelic sparrow. Oversized perhaps and very bad taste indeed. The body is lemon yellow, the tips of the wings and feet are black, the beak is dark pink red like the belly. But upon approaching the small body that is racked by sporadic fits and starts, we realize that the abdomen is not regular.

Another pair of small, bright pink wings emerge from what should be the belly of the bird. The animal has been turned upside down to allow for the batteries to be replaced with these new ones, that are not quite the right size and that produce an alternative sound and vibrato instead of a continuous one. What's more, the small wings are those of another animal, a kind of pink bee of which we can only see the pathetically protruding wings.

Further along, slumped against a plinth, a soft, white form is placed like a bag waiting. It is pierced by a hole. Just beside it a larger similarly made shape with the contours of a cross or an X is placed at the foot of an Arab horseman. We are reminded of the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg in stiff cotton canvas that represented elements of mass consumer society, in his gallery in New York in the early sixties. Benjamin Hirte explains that the disk has the shape of the Atlas, the first vertebra in the spinal column.

We rediscover grated metal structures at various points in the space, sometimes at different heights, sometimes with a black liquid that is animated by a pumping system or a strip of rubber floating in the water. Again we are reminded of elements from sewer systems, fragmented and with no clear function. These five sculptures are located on three different floors along the path of the exhibition that runs through the house and their geometric, indexed forms relate to a map – or a model-like floor piece by Hirte in black and white, located on the first floor.

The sculptural metal blocks are in fact pieces of an alphabet, invented by Benjamin Hirte, called *Lochband*, (2015). Together they form the letter C of the alphabet that can only be perceived in hindsight, from memory. One thinks of the "theater of memory" and this rhetorical technique established by Quintilian and Cicero that has been used since antiquity, re-conceptualized by Giulio Camilo during the Renaissance. The speaker visualizes the different parts of a speech as if they were different rooms in a house in order to better remember them accurately. This mnemotechnical form uses the house as a metaphor for the different parts of a text. Here the house of Canonica becomes the framework for a different

story, whose elements are distributed among those of the museum. Aby Warburg spoke of artworks as the images of a film lacking movement. And in fact a *Lochband* formally resembles a film roll.

C is the first letter of Canonica, and becomes the triggering element, the incipit of a text to be imagined from visual forms. Imagine a grammar of forms, whose scattered elements are spread out over space (the different rooms of the house) and over time (the different periods evoked by the sculptures or furniture that belongs to different eras). We should then, adopt a "bird's eye view".

The "bird's eye view" is a way of getting a view of the whole, from above, and also of synthesizing what we are seeing. In French one speaks of traveling "at birds flight" to simplify a distance, shortening the perspective of a journey.

The presence of Rantanen's birds, and indeed this vision of the bird, encourages us to consider the different objects both as distinct forms, artworks in their own right, and as clues to a hermeneutic form. The sculptures become signs to be deciphered, a "language of the birds".

Strips of rubber can be found partly arranged in two of Hirte's metal elements on the ground floor but also in a more visible fashion on the first floor. There in the living room with its piano, *Untitled*, 2016 forms a flexible network on the ground. The black rubber strips intersected with white strips of fibre resin form a maze of lines that spreads from the feet of a sofa and goes around the piano's footstool. There are more black elements than white. They yet again resemble holes in film roles or notes on a keyboard. The white seems to mark an interval, indicating a silence within the curves.

The *Hanging Strips* (2017) by C.Rantanen is made up of thirty or so suspended elements that, from a distance, bring to mind sticky strips of flypaper. In reality they are small pieces of transparent plastic that are trapped in strips of silicon glue: wires, small pieces of paper and aluminum... These stalactites reach down to eye level and we are left with decoding the indexed traces of an activity that belongs either to industry or to surgery. Their disturbing aspect is similar to that of the reversed birds: a form of abjection crystalized in matter. One is reminded of the definition of the *Formless* by Bataille (4) and of his conclusion that saw the world "as spittle".

Rantanen's sculptures play between "decoy" and "decay". Further along, in a room that in the time of the Borghese was used to breed birds, peacocks, ostriches, and ducks for the hunters, that have since disappeared, lies the back end of a deer. *Deer Rear*, 2017, is a plastic bait used by hunters. The tail is animated by a battery and wags spasmodically. Here Chadwick Rantanen uses a real object, taken out of its context, simply modifying the rhythm of the tail by employing weaker batteries.

The deferred movement of the tail gives it a pathetic quality that is quite funny. Our smile protects us. Deep humor provides distance. The pun on the sound of the words ("deer/dear") plays with what we can see, literally the back end of a deer, but also symbolically, a turn of

reality. Once again, the impression of a trap and “bait” sculpture can be felt, much like the “nasty art” of Bruce Nauman (5). This “nasty game” is one that undoes the usual rules of what we think we recognize, with standard art conventions being turned inside out like a glove.

At the very beginning of the exhibition, a metal box is placed at the base of a plinth that hosts a knight on a horse.

It is an aluminum cast of a storage box. In this case it is a “life size” cast of a pedestrian, everyday object. Its functionality as a storage tool has been removed by the casting, replaced by the symbolic use as a sculpture. Many sharp objects that prick the eye can be found in the Canonica museum. For example Benjamin Hirte’s “The Realist”, 2014 clocks, non identical twins of a suspended time. Hirte transforms things into objects, and objects into sculpture by this change from functionality to absurdist use.

After finishing the tour of the museum, one is surprised of find oneself wanting to begin again, moved by doubt. Did we really see what we just saw? In fact it is a kind of “déjà vu” that requires a “double-take”. We can see to what extent all of these objects have been arranged and put in such a way as to blend in with the place: the cuckoos of C. Rantanen over the sculptors bed (small turned Swiss clocks in the shape of chalets) and in particular his *Telescopic Poles* (2016).

These colored (pink) vertical rods give rhythm to the space of the museum and radically change our vision of it (*Telescopic poles*, 2016, *Strips*, 2017). This simple gesture, a pole that runs from the floor to the ceiling, brings to mind a joke by Steven Wright that the artist quotes elsewhere (6) “*A lot of people are afraid of heights. Not me, I am afraid of widths*” The rods go all the way from the floor to the ceiling and raise the question of gravity in the context of a museum of sculptures. As we approach them we can see that they are made up of a succession of poles. They are tipped with tennis balls of about the same color. This system takes its inspiration from the way that people modify and customize walking aids.

In fact, to dampen the shock as they touch the ground, people add elements to the tips of the frame. This creates a kind of “prosthesis for prostheses”. Most people use balls that they have modified themselves, except in the United States where we can find pre-cut balls. These are bought from Asia and “hand cut” by single worker companies in the USA, which means they are manufactured by an invisible “lumpen-proletariat” from the postcolonial area, but are then given the final “handmade touch”, the “made in USA”. The artist has been collecting these balls since 2009, searching among industrial products for those that conserve aspects of an activity that is the result of “human touch”.

C. Rantanen has appropriated an artifact from contemporary society and hi-jacked it by mixing it with another related product: telescopic poles used for purposes like hanging signs, cleaning ceilings, walls or windows – generally for extending an individual’s reach. The artist colors and treats them in a way that is worthy of a minimalist’s fetish for finishings. He customizes them to some extent, a form of “tuning”. There is a deep humor in this that the artist is looking for.

Isn’t it true that comedy is tragedy plus time? The colorful balls become a customized “touch” on this prosthesis for old people’s legs. A “swinging” sculptural potential, looking like the

modern sticks of a canonical “contrapposto” sculpture. Bringing the cast of a storage box, bird calls, cuckoo/bumble-bee clocks, and a giant vertebra collapsed at the feet of a low-relief carving, into a museum of casts and academic sculptures, is like introducing dissonant elements into an ‘Epinal Print’. Chadwick’s colorful lines and hidden bees, placed in Cuckoo Clocks on a hanging fabric covered in a bee pattern, generates a shift that makes us look at the whole as being “against nature”. I find myself thinking of the novel by Huysmans. Rantanen’s telescopic lines and Hirte’s grates are two sides of a modernity that is not done with Modernism. They remind us that there is no inside or outside, no structure or décor, but that the cover, the plastic film, the unpolished canvas, is the form of the spirit of the times. This is closer to the idea of a bait than it is to the *trompe l’oeil*, closer to an art that is not one of taste but one that questions the automatic nature of our reflex to recognize certain things as art objects, when in reality art is to be found within surprise.

Marie de Brugerolle

1. Mike Kelley, Playing with Dead Things, in the catalogue of *The Uncanny*, 1992, Tate Modern, Liverpool.
2. *From The Sublime to the uncanny: Mike Kelley in conversation with Thomas Mc Evilley*, Dec. 1992, reprinted in *Mike Kelley, Foul Perfection, essays and criticism*, The MIT Press, p59.
3. Ibid.
4. Bataille George, in *Document 7*, 1929, p 382.
5. Bruce Nauman, for example the neon sculptures “Run from Fear, Fun from Rear”, 1972 .
6. Snowden interview, received from C.Rantanen, September 2017.

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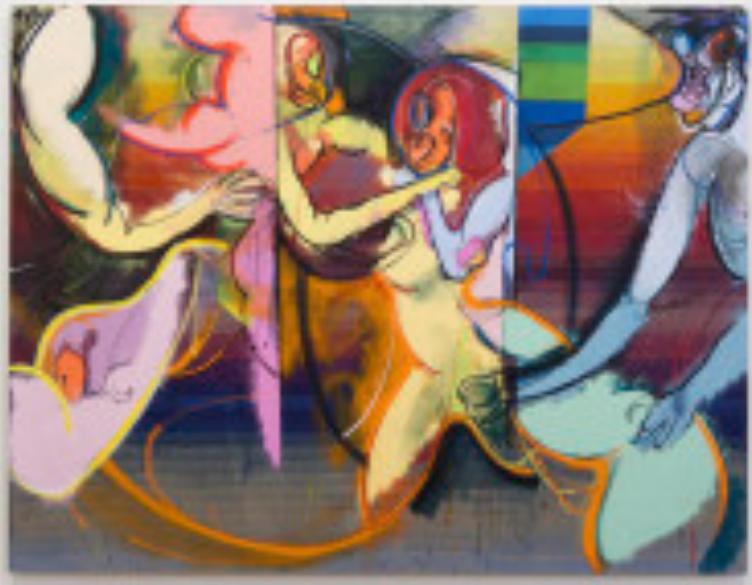


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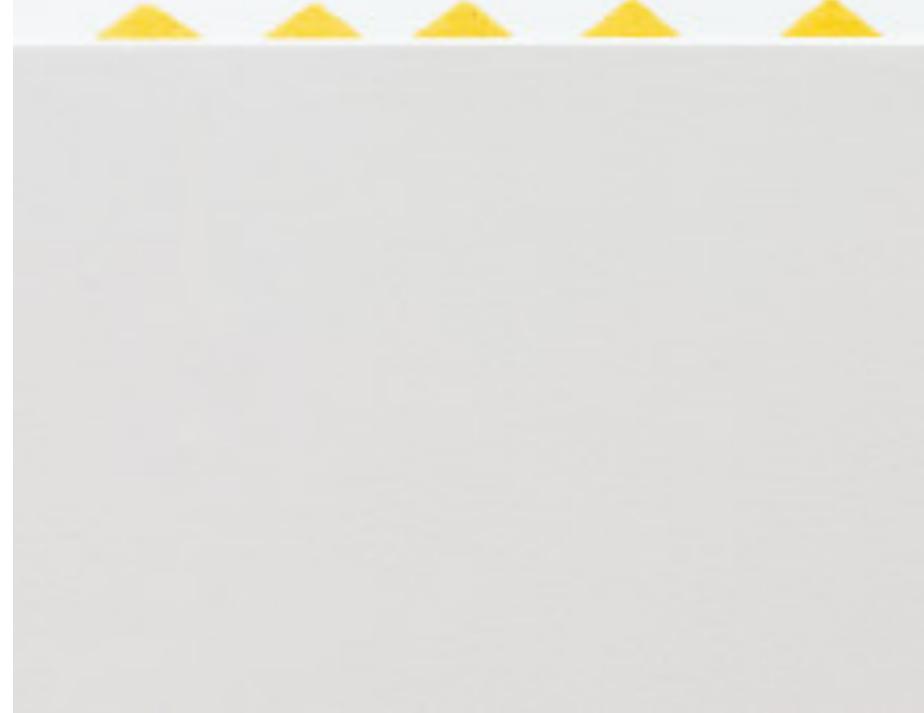


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