



Jesus as Readymade

Interview with Kaspar Müller
about his exhibition “Frankfurt Freakout” in Kriens¹
Peter Fischli

We were driving with my deep black Volkswagen on a sunny Sunday morning in late December from Zürich to Kriens, a moderately wealthy middle-class suburb of Lucerne.

There was no snow covering the landscape on which the *überclean* Swiss highway made its nice curves and straight lines. I was asking myself some questions in a state of daydreaming without clear directions or conclusions about Kaspar’s show.

The Museum Bellpark is a mansion from 1910, restored in a semi-correct way in the 1990s. It still has lots of traces of its former life as a bourgeois residency, like a chimney, a glass veranda or a representative stairway, so the transformation into a white cube is nicely interrupted with some well-done ugly Swiss design details. Placing furniture as artworks in such a space creates a wonderful unclarity and difference to their status as sculptures. Boris Groys’ thoughts on Kierkegaard crossed my mind while my car knew exactly its way and parked on the fine gravel in front of the museum.

As an example of such a difference, Kierkegaard uses the figure of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Kierkegaard states that the figure of Christ initially looked like that of every other ordinary human being at that historical time. In other words, an objective spectator at that time, confronted with the figure of Christ, could not find any visible, concrete difference between Christ and an ordinary human being—a visible difference that could suggest that Christ was not simply a man, but also the son of God. Thus, for Kierkegaard, Christianity is based on the impossibility of recognizing Christ as God—the impossibility of recognizing Christ as different.

If we look more closely at the figure of Jesus Christ as described by Kierkegaard, it is striking that it appears to be quite similar to what we now call the “readymade.” For Kierkegaard, the difference between God and man is not one that can be established objectively or described in visual terms. We put the figure of Christ into the context of the divine without recognizing Christ as divine—and that is what makes him genuinely new. But the same can be said of the readymades of Duchamp. Here we are also dealing with difference beyond difference—now understood as difference between the artwork and the ordinary, profane object [...] The museum—an art space

1. Kaspar Müller, “Frankfurt Freakout,” Museum im Bellpark, Kriens, November 25, 2015–February 14, 2016.

or the whole art system—also functions as a place where difference beyond difference, between artwork and mere thing, can be produced or staged.²

Peter Fischli: One way to start thinking about this show would be with art-theoretical terms, hitting all the points about this place, this museum, bringing in these objects, talking about these patina covered ideas and concepts of post-readymade and appropriation. Another way would be just talking about the objects themselves, which would be, like Georges Perec writes about them in his book *Les Choses*, also talking about the relationship they have with us as a collective and with you as a person, or in society, defining classes, or distinction and the judgement of taste.

Kaspar Müller: It offers different starting points at once. I like to see this moment, where one is confronted with reacting to this situation of parallel and overlapping, as a *déjà-vu*-like moment. I was always wondering if a *déjà-vu* can be somehow stimulated, maybe in art terms, maybe neurologically supervised, with calculated inputs of all senses. A *déjà-vu* is mainly a cerebrosplinal “hang-up,” to use a computer term. The brain is not following up with processing the given information, even though it’s not a problem of understanding, but of processing. So it seems you have already been there, in the same dispositions. You can’t put it in order and you are haunted. But obviously in this show, besides the ones you mention, there is another important string, the media one, or say the “digitalization,” by which I mean on an obvious level: the books and CDs, and on a second level, also the furniture, that are part of an advanced digitalization. The designs, shapes and materials of what we see here, are already stored in the computer as files. The new furniture is almost completely plotted out from the files, using ingredients, and of course the licensed remakes of the old classics, which are digitally imported and adapted in a fully automated process. Of course not all of these objects were files when they were produced in their time, the Thonet rocking chair in the other room is over 100-years old, it was a drawing-board file then, which is now digitalized. What we see here is somehow this promise of complete digitalization and how it’s already become a reality, or how it’s shifting towards that. Though everything here is extremely tangible, its “origin” seems now shifted to the digital already.

PF: Yes. I mean, this also becomes clear on the second floor where you have this table with CDs. You never know if they are used or empty. On the mirrored side of the CD you can see your wondering face, asking the question of what’s stored behind the mirror. For me this became kind of obvious in this object. There is a nice contradiction in the problem that you talk about now: in the end, you could say that the books and CDs are places where information is stored, or

2. Boris Groys, “On the New,” in *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2013), 28-29.

a story is told, but still they are objects, so it’s the contrary with the furniture, which are objects “carrying” a file.

KM: That’s true. The furniture is a tangible object, created from a file, an item of use, a negative of the physical body—at least in European design. I have chosen very well-known and familiar pieces of furniture, which have, in common sense, become signs. For example, an actual Eames chair is already the sign for an Eames chair. What I mean is, when you look at the Eames chair, it’s not the specific material that you see first, it’s the sign it stands for and this dematerializes the furniture already. And then in the next step when you take the sign to a file of virtual numbers, it’s even less material than the sign. It’s gone and its envelope is left over.

PF: I would like also to talk about the topic of “having” or owning things, especially furniture with their volumes and presence in our everyday life in contrast to just observing them here in a museum, and what it means to just own a file, a file of a book, a piece of music or a movie. Is owning a file a new form of “having”?

KM: If we think about software or a data carrier, we think about something unseizable, we think about the disappearance of the objects, this feeling of depletion. If you mention the different files, a book, a 16mm role, a stick with music on it, it’s like when you first heard a CD after the LPs, the lack of the swoosh was disturbing, instead it was like hearing the digital void.

PF: Yes. We could think or speculate that way, but for reading a file we always need to also have an apparatus, an apparatus that always makes a certain interpretation and manipulation of a file.

KM: I like the symbols of the transaction. Maybe all is a permanent transaction, but with the CD it’s almost a narrative. I think about the promise of digitalization ten years ago, when the CD was one promising step of many on this humble path, it was an intermediate result and stands for a certain period, almost, as if it is now a sign for this period.

PF: I tried to make categories of the objects. You could say you have antiquities, or just outdated things, and then you have things you could describe as nostalgia, like the nostalgia of modernism and postmodernism, and then, in the CDs, you would have already the nostalgia on the digital. And I think the objects which are just outdated, like this Ikea sofa, have the most difficult status today because they are not new and not old yet. They are not really attractive because they are, in French they say, *démodé*. But also these Ikea sofas, at one moment we will have a nostalgic approach to them, so they always go to a different status of value. How do you see that?

KM: On the furniture, I have also sporadically placed objects, like inhabitants of these furnished rooms, such as miniature cars, candleholders, nutcrackers, a spear from the Roman empire, a teddy bear from 1930, a flat iron and kids shoes from the 1850s and many other items of shifting values. These bibelots are like small indicators, vectors of time and status, which populate the exhibition, and make the installation a stage and play of objects and their values—with and without us. With the Ikea furniture as an example it's especially complicated to talk about the status. So far it's neither yet nostalgic or sentimental, nor has an identity of a certain time, it's still in production. A collector's value would be the edition number—the first series of Billy shelves ever. But with a new one you wouldn't even get a "like" for it. Well, maybe for bachelor sentimentality. But there are many other objects and furniture in the show that have transferred into these different segments of value you mention. What we shouldn't forget, especially with Ikea, is their statistical value. It's the most sold sofa in the world. Like the Billy shelf is the most sold piece of furniture ever. But it's not just that the Ikea sofa we sit on right now exists in millions. Also the old objects, which seem more unique, still exist in thousands and used to be mass products. The objects that I gathered here are not genuine, they are not really special. It creates more of a feeling of detachment than attachment.

PF: I would love to own the first ever produced Billy shelf. I would feel very sophisticated.

KM: That would be the super gag.... With all this scoria from mass-production, it's like when you cut the head of the Hydra, two grow back.

PF: What I like about the ambiguity of this place—it's a damaged white cube, it's an incomplete white cube. By bringing in this furniture you are also turning it back into into this house. Or it looks like a pre-selected thrift store. One could say your objects stand with one leg still in the profane space and with the other in the museum, a *Heimatmuseum*.³ It's the topic of ambiguity, because on one side, you could say you hit this, some leftovers of the idea of the readymade are still here. But on the other side, we know the readymade only works in a completely white cube. Maybe the invention of the white cube was more important than the invention of the readymade because only the white cube makes the readymade possible.

KM: This was absolutely helping to play with this confusion, because the space is also ambivalent. Parts of it, like the neon lamps on the plastering ceilings, are signs of a classic art space connotation, and there are no doors between the rooms for example. On the other hand, it's becoming a bit of a furnished

3. A museum, city museum or historical museum illustrating the historical development of a place (its history). Often characterized as a "home," with regional-based collections, exhibitions and documents. (Wikipedia)



Heimatmuseum again. Like there are some moments with the furniture where it reenacts and resets the life of a past time. The rocking chair next to the chimney is very atmospheric, like when "interior" was more determined by destiny. Of course it's just a reverberation in certain rooms, because with the motley mix of furniture I have brought here, it looks more like the set-up of a trendy design-boutique. And with that, it's closer to today's common understanding of "interior" and personalization.

Kaspar Müller,
Frankfurt Freakout,
Museum im Bellpark,
Kriens, exhibition view

PF: A thrift store of cultured citizen values, in a certain way. Like with the books, there are all these books that, a lot of them we know, and they are not trash, but they are also not really desirable books. Maybe some of them. I think the show wouldn't really work if you would do it in a gallery or how would you see that?

KM: No, I think it would work too, even in a white cube, in a box, but it would have to be different. It's hard to say how, I was really looking for this challenge, this place, not just the building, but also the rather provincial environment, the agglomeration around the former mansion. At the same time the furniture is really international. All the furniture that is here of course exists in Switzerland but you could buy almost exactly the same furniture we have here in New York, London, Paris, Düsseldorf or in São Paulo. In the Western-dominated hemisphere at least it's the common choice of design classics. So even though it's really Swiss



Kaspar Müller,
Frankfurt Freakout,
 Museum im Bellpark,
 Kriens, exhibition view

here, and Kriens is quite remote, it has this international furniture in many stores, in banking offices and now here in this museum too.

PF: It's a specific mixture of petit bourgeois, suburbia, middle class or moderately wealthy.

KM: Yes, it's moderately wealthy, that's almost "the" standard. Money is of course important to get access to this furniture—and we have a lot of it in Switzerland. That's why we have so much of this furniture. Though we must be honest to say that there are many people in Switzerland that can afford better, and more and more, that can afford less. The standard is shifting. That's maybe why this selection is interesting, and seems vulnerable. I talked with Hilar [Stadler, the director of the museum] about identity when we did a public tour here and he said that certain furniture, also for him and for visitors, an identity of a certain time they grew up with. Maybe I am a bit overhasty, but I think it will be more difficult for my and younger generations to pin down an identity with examples of such items. I think this is also shifting because it's more about access to information than to accoutrement. If you can't afford it, there are easy ways to get super cheap, very similar copies of everything, mainly with furniture. I wonder how high the percentage of copies is overall. So you can get the information from providers of mainly online accoutrement identities, which doesn't mean yet you can afford the product in the end, but you seem to be part of the circulation.

PF: So today they are more affordable and empty of meaning. They can be refilled with whatever, their original idea can be deleted, recycled or transformed. Above that, with the fact that visitors are not allowed to sit on the chairs, you bring in the moment of *noli me tangere*. They are temporarily liberated from their existence as utensils. For me, it's also a key moment, and smart in an economical way, that you can make, not only the things that you are bringing in your show, but *all existing things* become part of the show. And normally, when you look at this half ugly front desk, and you see how it's done in a mediocre way, the lift entrance, and all these things that normally artists have to fight against, you turn it, you turn all this bad water on your mill. And also, in this sense, a possibility to rethink the idea of appropriation, or post-appropriation, or the readymade, because it's not really fitting here. All these ideas and terms seem to be already in the thrift store of ideas. How do you see that?

KM: The thrift store of ideas is an image of spooking, undead ideas with the expression "thrift store" you add a bit of sentimentality to it which I find interesting. In terms of digitalization that we talked about before, the thrift store would be a database. In the thrift store you picture yourself as an individual human being who can still discover something, even a concept or idea, with puffing off the dust from its surface. In the database the information is digitalized and fed in, made callable and is even processed in a calculation, a big ideal algorithm.

PF: There is also a cheerful sadness floating in the show. Things feel like they are no longer objects of desire.

KM: There's a volitional dilemma with these displayed objects, whether you want to keep them or if it's better to get rid of them. They are all on the edge of being complete physical burdens. They are in the transaction in a way too. That's maybe the "cheerful sadness"—the failure, the incapacity to let go.

PF: So to go back again to these three or four strings. One string is that you can talk about the show in this socio-cultural way, and another is that you can talk about, as you mentioned, the idea of the file where things are just shrunk to their symbols, that then can be reanimated and made out of real materials. And then another string would be like a sentimental way to look at these things. And on the other hand, also something that really, in a way, stands away from this normal-looking display that you are doing with the furniture—you put the books just on these piles. In a store they wouldn't be placed like this.

KM: Yes exactly, it's not appealing enough to sell for a store like this. But in these boutiques, they have things that serve only for the atmosphere. A 50s LP is playing out of context pop music. The entire set-up is messed-up. I wanted to have an absurd arrangement because these boutiques are more than grotesque if you look at them closely. Just that you have these boutiques somehow stands

for a reason, but not what's going on inside. And it's important that this show obviously isn't allegoric. When I was collecting these items, Merlin Carpenter opened his show in Berlin and wrote a press release saying his display is not an allegoric attempt but that he wanted to have the items be seen as hieroglyphs. I like that a lot because as Hegel said: the mysteries of Egypt were mysteries to the Egyptians too.

PF: What was it you called earlier in a slightly dramatic way fate or destiny? I love the idea to connect the Billy shelf with fate and destiny. How would you define their value?

KM: The Billy shelf is a perfectly adaptable design, processed by a high-speed cycle of production and distribution, perfectly tailored for average needs and with an axiomatic design. Once the body is absolved of its individuality it mutates to a field of experiments where "the collective" is having a fling—the artificial intelligence as the sum of the collective. With the acceleration and speed of technological evolution, Billy shelves are taking over the idea of social destiny. As the body vanishes from its fateful embodiment, it can be connected to a public exchange. The body disappears also in a way as it now serves a society compound. Singularity is the headword of course. In this show, it's much more about the leftovers, the hardware, accumulation of the debris rather than acceleration. Therefore, I like the sentimental term "thrift store"... the Billy shelf, as part of this process and as such unpretentious and in disguise as a harmless shelf of everyday use, is very striking. And I think Heimo Zobernig did this brilliantly in his work with Billy shelves and mannequin bodies. The Billy shelf as almost the better body. Today identity works more as a tale, as the sum of all personally reachable data one knows about oneself and also what others are ascribing. Here a Corbusier sofa, there an Eames chair, some kind of Frankenstein monster as a personalized identity with external parts, where everything, that was once part of a destiny like identity. Say, having farmer's chairs at home as a farmer, or, because you were born in a lefty academic family in Switzerland, a Corbusier divan bed, as a mix of socialism and psychoanalysis. It's now just a module of a seedbox of external personalization, not destiny from "within." That's a process, that is still rather far from completion and this is not a show about singularity. What I am more interested in is the interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, when it seems that this monster has feelings and wants to express them even though there is no soul. Or is there? That would somehow be the emotional output of the show even though I don't use a cyborg to perform that but use furniture and antiques. Do you know what I mean?

PF: Yes, I think so. That you become an accumulation of alien elements that are nice and scary. It brings up the idea of identity as fiction in which all these things have the function of a stage set. This desire of having something alien in your identity. Or like Paul Valéry describes it, "I don't have to always share



my opinions." But in a certain way the objects in the museum here—when you come here and you look at it as if it was a house that people left and just left their furniture—are also the objects *without* us.

Kaspar Müller,
Frankfurt Freakout,
Museum im Bellpark,
Kriens, exhibition view

KM: Yes exactly. *Without us*; that's an important point. They are excrements of our civilization and our imagination. We are there just as a negative mark.

PF: And this is maybe also an aspect that, was always interesting, the absence of the subject. It's the contrary of what Perec is writing, that it's connected to some person. Here it's the *Abwesenheit*, the absence of the person, that has a relationship with these objects. I would like to go back to the certain atmosphere of a sweet sadness that is in the show, something between a cynical and a sentimental mood. An atmosphere of cheerful malignancy.

KM: The malignancy could be how you are punished by the evidence of your own insignificant image cultivation, looking at these so familiar, circumstantial scoria. How much we are polished off with personalization as a promise of individualization, that deserves a relieving joke, and is what makes these objects look so humble, and again, lovable.