

PANTS ON FIRE. Art and other fictions

With Kaja Clara Joo | Dejan Kaludjerović | Marlene Lahmer | Estefanía Peñafiel Loaiza | Nazanin Mehraein | Lara Reichmann | Hector Schofield | Nedko Solakov | Kai Trausenegger | Kay Walkowiak | Ramiro Wong. | A Project by Klaus Speidel & TransArts / DieAngewandte

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“Liar, liar, pants on fire” is what English children chant to accuse their peers of dishonesty. On the internet, many a politician’s trousers have been symbolically lit on fire. But if liars’ pants really caught fire, would artists get away unscathed?

“Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth”, says a famous quote attributed to such an infamous propaganda genius that it can hardly save the artist’s ass. But is make-believe, a central means of children’s games and art production, the same as lying? Opinions diverge: Plato was not amused and decided to kick the artists out of his (imaginary) ideal republic, where Aristotle made imitation his ideal of learning.

When Joseph Beuys fell from the sky in World War II, was saved by nomads and embarked on a miraculous journey to renew art, few people knew that it was at best a fever dream and at worst a lie. But who cares? Who prefers the boring truth to a dazzling artist figure?

Artist myth creations like these underline the art world’s intricate relationship to semi-truth. Artists create fictions, ask for the voluntary suspension of disbelief, and question what can be asserted. This is what *Pants on fire. Art and other fictions* is about. Not truth or lie, but blurry pictures of things that (never) happened.

By creating a work based on interviews with the witnesses of an event that happened over 30 years earlier, **Dejan Kaludjerović** takes as the starting point not artistic fiction, but the fictionalization our memory operates. By dissociating two elements of his work in the exhibition space, he challenges the visitors to themselves remember, connect and compare.

The fiction created by **Kaja Clara Joo** is harder to read, but once we put together the pieces scattered across the exhibition rooms and find the key, it seems so bold that it becomes hard to believe. Joo tells a story of materials from the moon, brought to earth by the artist and still dripping with an otherworldly liquid, perhaps slowly contaminating the gallery. But at least her fiction is easily revealed, while we might never find out if the “real” moon landing only took place in Hollywood. Confronting the organic materials with their clean and beautiful photographic image, Joo speaks less of a supposed *this-has-been* or “the power to authenticate” (Roland Barthes) than the ways in which photography transforms the appearance of reality.

Once we literally connect through headphones to **Kai Trausenegger**’s sculpture that stands like a red goddess in the centre of the exhibition room, it begins to cajole us into desiring, even loving it, in turn inviting us to see it as an art market allegory and taking it to the beach, talking about our

mothers and probing our virility. As it seamlessly shifts ground, using techniques of gentle persuasion borrowed from hypnosis and Neuro Linguistic Programming, its specific unspecific form gives way to a flood of projections, each of which seems equally compatible with what we see. To create what looks like cheap adverts for expensive properties, **Lara Reichmann** combines artistic research and myth-creation in such a way that it becomes hard to tell what, exactly, is based on historical facts about false beliefs and what has been added for more commercial effect by her fictional real estate agency. Playing with the codes of property marketing, she puts on display a transparent rhetoric which tries to tap into the dreams and desires of future owners, who are willing to suspend their disbelief in order to realize their dreams of exclusive land ownership.

Formally austere, **Kay Walkowiak's** work *Specific Objecthood (Plug #1)* can, like Trausenegger's piece, be conceived as a conceptually juicy comment on relational aesthetics – or art that wants us to interact at any price. The sculpture invites us to literally connect to it by inserting its “tail” into our body like objects in a David Cronenberg movie. For *Specific Objecthood* Walkowiak assembles a chain, canvas and an “ordinary” sextoy. By turning them into art and he performs the “transfiguration of the commonplace” which Arthur Danto considered to be the basic operation of art creation since Duchamp's *Fountain*, the urinal turned artwork. **Walkowiak's** cinematic film *Anonymous Objects* does the opposite: It literally gives voice to sculptures by Brancusi or Calder whose status has shifted so radically that they are no longer considered valuable icons of modernity (at least in their current context), but are left to catch dust in ordinary Hongkong neighborhoods. The work resonates with the thoughts of philosopher Nelson Goodman more than Danto, when he insisted that instead of asking the question “What is art?”, we should ask “When is art?”. *Art-making*, in other words, is no one-way-track: Ordinary things can certainly become art, but the opposite can also happen. If and how Walkowiak laid hands on works by Brancusi, Sol LeWitt or Alexander Calder is a question that we'd prefer to leave unanswered.

When he imagines a mausoleum for a “holy communist leader's body” conceived in 1989, **Nedko Solakov** also plays with questions of value. Using not only bronze, but also “various wires, screws, staples, a zip part, a drawer handle, a cap from an Earl Grey tea container, three floor covering samples and plywood” (among other things), we can – at the very least – doubt the sincerity of his noble endeavor. The same is true when he lends his voice to a small black square, which he endows with a cheesy gold-lacquer frame, making the “poor black painting” unhappy in with its ornamental context. Solakov and Walkowiak are able to create empathy for fictional narrators that are not even human.

When **Marlene Lahmer** invites us to contemplate what appears like a fallen screen, with subtitles scrolling below an absent image and voices speaking dramatic sentences about love and loss, she too makes us wonder about her position in regards to the words spoken: Did she write them? Does she embrace them? Are they public clichés with just enough of a twist to make us wonder if they might not, after all, be true? The sea of plastic pearls in which the screen seemingly floats, remind us of the cliché of the broken pearl necklace or children's games of make-believe, seem to contribute to the answer.

By inviting an Indian family that has developed an age-old expertise in the traditional art of visual storytelling to recount a story from Latin America, **Estefanía Peñafiel Loiza** explores what happens when stories pass from one culture, language and medium to another, how they change as they get assimilated... . *Traduttore, traditore*, the Italians say, associating translation to treason – and such treason is bound to occur as the tale gets translated from Spanish to English and then to Gujarati, so the Chitara family, that has been practicing the art of Mata Ni Pachedi – or visual storytelling – for 7

generations, can understand it and develop its visual rendering. But this is only the last part of a chain. After all, the artist can be seen as a translator of her or his thoughts and impressions of the world.

“Poets want to lose themselves on purpose in the forest of language, and to intoxicate themselves with bewilderment”, says Paul Valéry. The latter is an important part of the work of **Nazanin Mehraein**. Inviting us to penetrate into a dark room, she gives us access to the events that happened during three months of her life, nearly unfiltered, experiences expressed in drawings, voice and music. Operating within a powerful *rhetoric of sincerity*, she makes it very difficult not to believe that she speaks her mind – and heart. The second work in the “cave” of Krinzinger Projekte is a performance-installation by **Ramiro Wong**, which evokes images and feelings associated to shamanism and ritual. Wong uses real knowledge about the power of plants on the one hand and the power of beliefs on the other, subtly straddling the line between a skillful use of the placebo effect and an activity that might be called “charlatanism” if it wasn’t art.

Like Mehraein’s work, **Hector Schofield**’s creation directly reflects personal experience, skillfully unfolding a narrative that seems so personal and close to his biography that it is hard to believe when he insists on the fictional elements it contains, lest we think that all memory is full of fiction. Inviting us to play the story on our phones as we leave the gallery, Schofield unfolds a narrative of displacement that can accompany us on our trip back home or to the next location of our busy day.

Klaus Speidel, Vienna, June 2020