

Da cosa nasce cosa

Daniel Baumann talks to Riccardo Previdi

Riccardo Previdi: De Vleeshal has been used as an exhibition space for around 30 years now. I wanted to incorporate the extremely Gothic character of the space into my work – but without taking a strict location-based approach and instead addressing the idea of the Middle Ages and their significance. This prompted me to reread Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art and Literature*. He describes a dualism that was characteristic of the Middle Ages: the moment at which the culture of the ancient world and the culture of the Church were confronted with the "modern" culture of the evolving market, where the Church and new, secular patrons began to coexist – and this was before the Renaissance.

Daniel Baumann: A moment of transition.

RP Yes, that was the basic idea. That's why I turned my attention to the Gutenberg Bible published in 1452. It's a religious book and a modern object – an industrial product, if you will, even if only a small number of copies were printed.

DB Whether consciously or unconsciously, the Gutenberg Bible incorporated emancipation. Reproducibility enabled a new form of distribution and as such also of access. "Everyone" was able to buy, read and interpret the Bible – something that had previously been the exclusive privilege of the clergy.

RP And of course the translation into the German vernacular. It could be argued that we currently find ourselves in a similar moment, in which similar forces meet and it can no longer be said that the one is better than the other.

DB That – in analogy to the Gutenberg Bible – bourgeois culture is losing its authoritative position just as the clergy did then, with people able to assemble their knowledge on the Internet just as they are able to construct their faith themselves by reading the Bible.

RP Some say that the Gutenberg Bible was in a sense the origin of the Internet and thus marked the beginning of a state of incompleteness.

DB This was the starting point for your exhibition.

RP Yes, but also the location itself and above all the floor of De Vleeshal with its uniform grey-white-black pattern. It is essentially like the page of a book. Gutenberg split the page into two columns and introduced standardised margins. His greatest invention was movable type; this was interspersed with the coloured capital letters, which continued to be painted by hand. The role of both the movable letters and the capitals is assumed in the exhibition by the coloured rods in groups of three – which I call *Illuminati*. Within the context of the entire space, they appear as lines rather than rods.

DB These *Illuminati* give structure to the space like letters do to a page?

RP But as objects they can exist in any space.

DB That means I can buy an *Illuminati* and put it on display at home?

RP Yes, exactly.

DB And hang up my jacket on it?

RP Why not! My works evolve from reflections about function. De Vleeshal is showing three groups of works: the *Illuminati*, the *Fraktur* and finally the *Gs*.

DB What makes the Fraktur typeface special?

RP The name. Fraktur – from the Latin *fractus*, meaning "broken" – was the perfect starting point for the story that I wanted to tell in the exhibition. Fraktur is still one of the most commonly used Gothic typefaces. Like *textura*, the typeface employed by Gutenberg for printing the Bible, it was northern European lettering and, it could be said, a taboo for the Italians; the latter used *antiqua*, which is rounder and more closed. They considered Fraktur to be lacking grace ("sgraziata"), and Vasari hated it. Fraktur cuts and breaks lines and had heathen associations. The Nazis, for their part, initially promoted Fraktur but then ceased to do so because the Jews likewise used it and because it was not easy to read. It was later adopted by Pop culture, from Hard Rock to Hip-Hop – where it was perceived as representing evil forces. What also interested me, however, was to see how Fraktur, which is not easy to read, coincided with a democratic idea, i.e. the printed Bible in German. It lent itself to "industrial" usage, but was at the same time far more ornate than *antiqua*. You see that I'm not a scientist, but I conduct research; all these elements meet, and I piece together information.

DB Why do you do this?

RP It's fun! What's more, there are recurring issues involved that I consider important. It's about the question of whether our lives are better thanks to technology and knowledge, and about the concrete action that can be taken as a man or woman. Perhaps I was more optimistic in the past – or I have more doubts today.

DB You develop and piece together knowledge, but the result remains instrumental. A projection like the one in *Tatami + Pirelli* is full of references and is a simple and elegant illumination; a construction like *Volksbühne* is an autonomous work of art that references the works and ideas of others while at the same time serving as a stage for concerts; the *Illuminati* are lines within the space and may be coat stands or the like. There is, as in this project, the knowledge of the Gutenberg Bible and then the moment where something liberates itself from this and becomes independent but then in turn leads into another system. This is emancipation, but not a dream of autonomy.

RP This is obvious in the case of *Volksbühne*. This aspect of a dual function was really important. It has more recently enjoyed less emphasis, however, because I no longer found it sufficient; the same applies for the references.

DB But they're there nonetheless. But how can I comprehend that as a viewer entering the space? What or who helps me?

RP It's simply about enjoying the work as staged. I value the separate elements being autonomous items in their own right – as sculptures, for example.

DB But what exactly do you do? The further development of existing ideas and objects? A different writing of history? Is it about learning from history and undertaking something yourself?

RP You mean homework? No, for pleasure! Seeing the graffiti on the streets in the old days was important. Seeing how the most diverse range of stories came together there – the possibility of very disparate planes encountering each other without really meeting.

DB A playful approach, also a particular lightness, perhaps a trait of a certain northern Italian culture ...

RP ... but also of Switzerland, in a somewhat different version. Likewise a kind of humour with a certain political significance, a kind of subversion ...

DB ... that we only perceive now, because it was active outside the major ideologies and currents of thought.

RP You asked me why I select something and use it for my own means. It's like archaeological points of reference; on the one hand there's the treatment of the object, with its language, with the specific aim of showing that it was there, what was there, and to ask whether it still works. Instead of reinventing an idea, then, the first thing is to blow off the dust.

DB And elegance plays a part here?

RP If you interpret elegance as meaning simplicity or perhaps restraint, the ability to progress step by step, and the conviction that less is more – then yes. In this sense I still find elegance very fascinating, despite everything.

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