

What is *Templo de Medusa* | *Tempel der Medusa*?

As a project *Templo de Medusa* | *Tempel der Medusa* [TDM|TDM] is a selection criterion for real-time narratives of a group of events focused on the homonymous installation. When I wrote the project I had no idea about where in Hamburg and exactly when would the work be built and exhibited, or of its conditions of production. The objectives were achieved amid a large sequence of unexpected events. Some of the possible narratives of this process are unfolded in this book through a selection of texts and images.

Why Hamburg?

I feel Hamburg is a kind city. Its inhabitants are port-people who know how to watch the river passing by. In some aspects, they remind me the Montevideo folks. I was there for the first time in 2013, when the artist Julia Ring invited me to join a collective exhibition [*Unheimlich*, Frappant Gallery, October, 2013] at the Frappant e. V. artist's centre, where I finally built the *Tempel de Medusa* a year later. I then began to realize that Hamburg would be appropriate for a project that in some senses implied starting from scratch. Before arriving, I didn't have an exhibition place, production team or even a reliable room to live and work. From a methodological point of view, what I was doing was quite the opposite from what we use to call an "artistic residence": a system of production that I tend to call into question due to its contrived nature and the self-centredness of its achievements. I think that it cannot be compared with the process of appropriation of a city that we can carry out when we don't have any a priori institutional background or support and thus must "*testar las islas que van quedando*"*, i.e. the actual material conditions of production that the local people confront in their everyday life; the studio journal included in this book deals with these issues. But TDM|TDM as a project is not only what happened in Hamburg. From a more formal point of view, the installation *Tempel der Medusa* is just one chapter in a whole series of exhibitions, works, projects, relations and as-yet non-conceptualized flux entitled *Proyecto Melusina* or *Trabajos de Melusina* (*Melusine's works*), followed by another series of works, *Arqueologías* (*Archaeologies*), also related to the so-called *Tableaux Vivants*, a third group of productions. All these series' are also connected with some bigger

research projects such as AAAA [Non-disciplinary Academy of Extended Arts] and Art of Consensus, an investigation about collaborative thinking on what needs to be represented for the future in this born-to-be-past present. This book is about the process of working on the *Tempel der Medusa* installation, but also about the three "archaeological" exhibitions related to it, two of which were produced in Uruguay. And it's also about two other former exhibitions related to these from a taxonomical and thematic point of view. And there's no place where nor time during which all this could actually be concluded; this is one of the reasons why the notion of series is so important, together with the terms related to the language of painting.

What is *Melusine's Works*?

The title *Melusine's Works* essentially names a method addressing a manner of exhibiting. A series of paintings on cardboard are produced. A framework structure made of "shamanically" assembled found wood is built at the same time, or before, or after that, with the aid of maps, drawings and mock-ups. Then, or at the same time, the paintings on cardboard are fixed to that structure forming "walls" and "roofs" (and, of course, corners, tokonomas, holes, and so on). The work is inaugurated and the visitors enter the ephemeral architecture as proposed by the installation, which is also an ensemble of paintings displayed in narrative form. Thanks to the technique applied, the public may interact with the work using water, in an attempt to reveal what underlies the prevailing white appearance of the images. The construction remains a short time where it was located, and is later dismantled. Some of these devices were made in institutional contexts, and two of them were exhibited in white cubes, but I prefer the public space, which is, without the slightest doubt, more significant, challenging and richer in possibilities for chance events, improvisation and interaction.

What is the subtext under the title of this series?

Melusine was originally a folkloric character from certain regions of what are now France and the Benelux, and the protagonist of old legends that reached literary form by the end of the 14th century. We may now consider her a literary character with an outstanding career, visited by Breton, Goethe and Proust and also by Manuel Mujica

Láinez, who wrote (*El Unicornio*) a sort of implausible mythical biography. Melusine is a water nymph who takes the shape of a woman and goes on diverse adventures until she is discovered and runs away. I'm interested in two aspects of Melusine which explain her appearance in my work. The first is her capacity to magically build wonderful constructions in one night which, nonetheless, always entail some sort of mistake, vice or imperfection. The other aspect is her aquatic nature: when in contact with water, even if she's sprayed, Melusine shows her true side, and thus looks more like a siren. The constructions of the *Melusine's Works* series play with both references.

When did you start with this series?

The series [December, 2014] is now composed by six presentations. It began in 2013, although was preceded by a work from 2010 entitled *Casa de Medusa (House of Medusa)*. The first installation of the *Melusine's Works* series was exhibited in Nancy, France (7th October, 2013), and the last one in Lendava, Slovenia (28th November, 2014).

Why do you use cardboard and wood?

I started using rough, worn, found wood in this symbolic way in an installation and a series of sculptures from 2006 in which I thematised the Fall of Icarus. Before that, I employed wood as a medium for drawings and paintings. These paintings and series of paintings from 2004-2010 were also essays on appearance, disappearance, vanishing and demise. They put into play notions regarding the evident temporality of the pictorial surface itself. Cardboard started to be important because of technical and practical reasons when, after living 12 years in Montevideo, Uruguay, I began to live nomadically, staying during long periods in different cities and countries. I then began to look for appropriate materials to apply some technical and pictorial ideas in large format, to create easy to transport paintings and installations. Cardboard is cheap or free, is an important part of urban debris, refers to processes of conversion and metamorphosis of organic matter, has the colour of the skin, evidences former usages related to merchandise and travel. It has marks such as signs, letters and words, wounds and stamps. The painted surface of a painting on cardboard may be detached and transported as very thin paper, as I did on many occasions as was the case with the whole *Tempel der Medusa*. While building the installations I usually only use nails and traps, sometimes wire, tape, and string. Painting is another matter. Nevertheless, cardboard isn't rare in the tradition of painting, not at least in my country, where it may be frequently found in low budget constructions and poor housing. I later discovered and studied the work of other contemporary artists working on large size installations made of cardboard, such as Christian Eisenberger, Rob

Voerman, Sylvie Reno, Mahony and the Russian painter Walerij Koschljakov, with whom I share many things in common.

Sometimes it seems difficult to talk about painting today –we even began to discuss what is beside or behind or above it. However, at the same time it seems that for you painting comes first, and this could also be said regarding the installation's themes and its structural configuration, isn't that so?

More or less: first of all comes thought, which is drawing, and then comes the drawing of thought: schemes, lists, diagrams, and so on. Anyway, these installations are, in my opinion, pictorial devices. The first time I used these materials I was experimenting with the representation of movement and change, not at iconographical level but as it arises from the material itself. Portrait and self-portraits were the privileged themes at that time (2004-2010). From a technical point of view, I was revisiting some experiences made by the *matérico* painters from the 70's in Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina. They were important for my generation, especially in academic circles. In 2008 I started to work in a more alchemical way, let's say: studying old recipes, collecting substances and materials, producing oils, leaving things to ferment and rot, improvising. The project Laboratorio Color y Contexto [Colour and Context Laboratory], a subgroup within the Traspuesto de un Estudio para un Retrato Común [Transposed Study for a Common Portrait] artists' association, functioned during this same period. Our intention there, in the context of a collective effort to represent a place, was to produce colours and materials to paint and draw only using organic substances and materials offered to us by the natural environment. I also decided to use only organic and mineral materials in my work, although I'm not intransigent in this regard. By chance I discovered that I could realise whatever I sought to using lime and a very small repertory of substances: earths, oils, milk, gesso, plants, oxides, blood, charcoal... In this context, the use of cardboard isn't part of an orthodox position: it's just that some effects can only be achieved with it. What I now do is in some ways a variant of the fresco technique -not the Renaissance fresco, but the pre-classical one. It's just that the materials supporting it are inappropriate for that function, and there's some kind of revelation in this incoherence. All this makes sense due to the functional purpose of the paintings which are functional to the installations: they are "roofs" and "walls", they are decorative.

What "effects" are you talking about? Is the interactive potential of these works so important for you that you ask visitors to throw water to them to "see" what is behind the white surface? Wouldn't this only be a spectacular aspect, so to say?

The "effects" I was talking about are a representation of

movement, transformation and change, although for anybody who studies the historical context in which I initiated with these practices (post-dictatorial Uruguay - and also in democratic Slovenia, by the way) it will become apparent that the notions of disappearance, erasing and reappearance are not there by chance. Anyway, this aspect of the technique applied acquires different grades of importance in each edition of *Melusine's Works*. In *Tempel der Medusa* it isn't important, and the visitors didn't interact with the installation in this way, it simply proposed itself as a space to go through. The same may be said about *Pasaje de Medusa*, displayed at the National Museum for the Visual Arts of Montevideo in August, 2014. The cases of the first installation of the series, exhibited in a public space in Nancy, France and the seventh, erected in a central square of Lendava, Slovenia, are different because the iconography (related to historical painting) and the highly symbolic and controversial places for which the installations were conceived granted more significance to the act of un/veiling, which is, in fact, a very simple chemical reaction. But it's also something that occurs in time. Without using water you just need to observe more intently to "see" what is behind. Perhaps it is possible to "see" more this way than when throwing water to the image. And who says that there isn't even more to be "seen" behind what is behind? And where or when is there nothing more left to be "seen"? I like complicated images. We need them urgently, after so many years of one-idea works of art and single-concept manners of displaying works of art. I like allegories and emblems. We need them urgently, and this is a difficult task, because the existence of allegory (real allegory, not its post-modernist simulacra) rests largely on social consensus about what represents what. We must return to macro political thought, without losing the achievements of micro political devices. Our situation is desperate.

What can you say about the architectural references of these constructions?

The places where the installations are displayed are quite eloquent. I'm interested in the immediate, irreversible, elusive, ludicrous, perverse contrast that these installations establish, produce and invent between themselves and the surrounding architectures and vice versa. This was very clear in Lendava, where the installation appeared as a sort of zigzagging tunnel placed in the middle of a public esplanade. It was at the same time standing in the way and conceptually communicating the austere synagogue and the disturbing mass of the very dark building in front of it - a theatre and concert hall designed by the controversial Hungarian architect Imre Makovecz. The shape of that installation also established a curious dialogue with other surrounding buildings such as the block of flats in

front of the square and a former shopping mall. Talking about materials and connotations, a South American person would make an immediate mental connection between my installations and the *villas, cantegires, favelas* and *chabolas* in the outskirts of all the big cities of the continent. This subtext is not apparent to all, at least in Europe, but it's there. Precariousness, marginality and poverty are some of the words that spectators and visitors of the installations mentioned, but also resistance, inventiveness, habitability. The paintings make everything more complex and not so univocal, and simultaneously create distance between these experiments and the tradition of architectural models made by architects and placed in public spaces. Furthermore, because habitability is something the installations resemble and not something represented or displayed as such. I think that the tradition of artist-made installations in public spaces that elaborate on notions of habitability is quite strong in Eastern Europe, even more than in Latin America: we need only think of the work by Raoul Kurvitz, Tomaš Džaden, Tadej Pogačar and Marjetica Potrč, among many others. This is a very interesting issue for me. But I generally think more about the specific functions related to the iconographic project in each installation. Then there is the typological aspect: *Tempel der Medusa* was a temple, and *Melusine's Works* 7 was a passage, like *Pasaje de Medusa*. The first of the Melusine works was a study for a monument that I'm still developing. The "house" of Medusa was an installation actually inside a house. The installation I made for the *Unheimlich* exhibition, in Hamburg, was a *Capella*, I think and elaborate on these categories to produce new works.

What is the *Arqueologías [Archaeologies]* project?

Once the installation is dismantled, the "walls" and "roofs" that I'm interested in are cut, sliced, fragmented, and prepared for an easy relocation. These sometimes rather large pieces of very thin paper (the painted surface of the cardboard) become the input for collages and new works. I have exhibited some of them as "archaeological remains" from the original installations. The first time I did this was in 2010, displayed as a narrative frieze in the *Loess* exhibition [Juan Manuel Blanes Fine Arts Museum, Montevideo, December, 2010-April 2011] using a group of paintings on cardboard that had been part of the *House of Medusa* installation. This is one of the reasons why I called the *Tempel der Medusa* a "temple". In this case, the exhibition of its ruins as archaeological remains had been planned since the very beginning of the project. The remnants of *Tempel der Medusa* were transported (illegally) to Uruguay in a bag and displayed there twice. Though Uruguay is not Greece, the irony of this protocol was pointed out by many visitors. With time, the entire set of archaeological remnants of many of the Melusine works will form an

autonomous corpus and find new permutations and configurations.

What about the *Tableaux vivants*?

The *Tableaux Vivants* series are un/veiled paintings developed in time and registered and exhibited as videos. As the video loop suggests, the operation and process of un/veiling the paintings themselves may be repeated over and over again. Some fragments of *Tempel der Medusa* were displayed autonomously as *Tableaux Vivants*.

What relations establish all these considerations regarding the concrete iconography unfolded in the series of paintings as such? What links materials and themes?

Themes are related to the functions of the displaying device and the place where it is located. Sometimes the chosen site has determined the iconography -although not always or not necessarily in a significant manner. Most often than not, a series of persistent images (from memory, drawing, books and archives) are combined with others glinting in reality, so to say. The latter are preserved in memory, in my own drawings from life, photos and videos. The combination of images from the past and these very present images, or images of presence, has a certain allegorical force and also carries my mind to the future. The work process also involves specific research and the appearance of new images and texts from the history of art, together with new manners of engagement with real people and the actual terms of the dialogue (between art and people). The aim of writing a studio journal, a practice I started in 2004 [*A Study on Onetti*, unpublished] is to record and document this processes. And, as stated somewhere there, the aim of this research, in terms of imagery, was not the representation of Medusa, but something else and closer to a rarefied and ever-changing image and idea of Medusa as some kind of signal, a dispersed order, an invisible conducting cable within a sequence of clusters of experiences and images, procedures and intuitions. Let's take a look at what was actually painted in the interior of the Temple of Medusa: figures from a photograph taken in Buenos Aires in 1972 showing some visitors in front of the bread oven of the artist Víctor Grippo; a portrait of the 17th century mystical writer Antoinette Bourignon; a parrot I dreamt with in Hamburg; a demented homeless I met in front of the National Library, close to a Balkenhol bronze sculpture when I went there to study some Neo Rauch books; a repository of eye models from different cultures and periods; a schematic drawing of a fire...

What is Medusa?

Medusa is Lee Miller. Francis Bacon and Picasso first showed me this. I later learnt this on my own.

And what about the *Raft of the Medusa*?

It also appears, especially in the diaries, although I had previously made some paintings based on some figures from Géricault's tableau. The study of this famous painting is related to the theme of Lampedusa as a symbol of the tragedy of African immigrants trying to reach the shores of Europe. The tragedy off the coast of Central Africa depicted by Géricault is a vignette from the colonialist era that mirrors and exposes some of the old blood-marks underlying the contemporary shipwrecks in the Italian coast. These stories are very actual and present in Hamburg today, where there is a strong community of African immigrants named, in fact, Lampedusa in Hamburg, which serves as an example of struggle and a precedent for the whole Germany, and has been supported by a large number of Hamburg citizens. During some time, when I was trying to produce the installation within this context and thinking about the area provided by a church in Altona [a neighbourhood of Hamburg] to a group of immigrants from Lampedusa in Hamburg, I took some steps in this direction. When the project proved unfeasible, I received an offer from a pastor to work in another part of the city, in an island called Veddel where there is also a strong community of African origin. However, I didn't have time to complete this project before leaving Hamburg, and felt really upset about it during the last two weeks I spent there, before finishing the work. All this was somehow present, and in the end even apparent, in the installation I built in Frappant's yard. Two days following the inauguration of the *Tempel der Medusa* I returned to take some pictures and found that somebody, possibly more than one person, had intervened the installation in a very awesome way. On one side of the temple he, she or they simulated a kind of living room set up with found objects. It looked as if it had been recently used by a group of people sitting round the fire and eating. At closer look one realises that the remains of the "dishes" are made with sand, soil and tree-leaves. Inside the "temple" there is new furniture: a wardrobe, cabinet and closet, while a large tree trunk stands in the middle of the central space by the painted fire. And, rudely embedded on a wall, we see a home-made pink flag with the following words painted in black: "BLEIBERECHT FÜR ALLE" [Right to stay for all]. When I saw this I knew everything was right. The installation had been used, its spirit understood, other meanings superimposed, and a new and anonymous complexity had thus arisen.

* "To test the remaining isles", a verse from the first poem of *Trilce* (1922) a book of the Peruvian writer César Vallejo.