

Ugo Rondinone

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

When Ugo Rondinone reluctantly gave his first public lecture in New York at the New School in 2013, it consisted of an extraordinarily literal walk-through of a retrospective exhibition that had been held at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Switzerland three years before: “I pass the ten bistro tables of the cafeteria and go to the ticket counter that is on



View of “Ugo Rondinone,” 2015.

the far left of the lobby. To the right of the ticket counter is the entrance to the first of seven rooms of the ground floor. . . . The first room has three sculptures. A tree, an oversized lightbulb, and a low relief of my right hand. In the middle of the room stands a white olive tree.” And so on. Rondinone meticulously listed every single work, the series it was part of, its name, and the materials from which it was made. This is the language of a catalogue raisonné, the degree zero of art history.

The cumulative effect of this painfully precise enumeration was monumentally boring, but in an interesting way. It demonstrated Rondinone’s fundamental mistrust of language as a tool for interpretation. As he said to Jarrett Earnest in the *Brooklyn Rail* the same year, “Language is tricky. We explain concepts with other concepts. It’s a losing game.” If we were to follow Rondinone’s directive, the description of his latest show in Zurich would run like this: “From June 13 to July 24, Ugo Rondinone presented eight paintings of brick walls in the Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich. The walls were orange, yellow, black, purple, white, green, pink, and blue. They were coated in oil paint on burlap. Each one was named after a specific date, written as one word, for instance *zweiundzwanzigsterjunizweitausendundvierzehn* (twenty-secondofjunetwothousandandfourteen), 2015. The paintings were erected across the gallery space on wooden supports. A visitor walking along the path defined by the walls saw, at various turns, six sculptures of opaque windows. In the final room was a large door of crude timber, painted dark gray: *lax low lullaby*, 2010. The door was bolted by a crossbar and had barred windows. On reaching the door, the visitor was obliged to turn back. Viewed from behind, the paintings revealed their wooden supports and brown burlap canvas, relieved by small embroidered drawings of clowns. As visitors left the gallery, the last work they would have seen was *Big Mind Sky*, 2007, a bronze, six-inch-high, keyhole-shaped lock hanging on a white wall. Within the keyhole-shaped lock was another keyhole.”

According to Rondinone’s rules of engagement, talking more means seeing less. This fits the blank, even resistant nature of his work, redolent

as it is with well-orchestrated ambiguity. The brightly colored bricks are painted larger than life—like a stage set seen too close for an illusion of realism to take effect. They’re primitive, even though nothing is more modern than a freestanding feature wall. The paintings hung heavily on their supports, their fibers saturated with oil paint. The room smelled of jute and linseed oil. The windows were opaque, the door conspicuously bolted. The door, which recalled equally a castle gate and those of a freight elevator, was shut with a large crossbar and had iron bars on its windows. But were we standing inside or outside the door? That Rondinone’s work is difficult to read is the result of the artist’s attempt to make it embody ambiguity.

About art, one must sometimes speak prosaically. But about life, you can risk poetry. On October 21, Rondinone’s “I ♥ John Giorno” opened at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The exhibition is a retrospective dedicated to Rondinone’s longtime partner, the man Andy Warhol filmed sleeping in 1963.

—Adam Jasper

ST. GALLEN, SWITZERLAND

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

KUNST HALLE SANKT GALLEN

Surah al-Balad 90:9 of the Qur’an states that man was created with “one tongue and two lips,” the latter presumably conceived to keep the former in check. More than an idea, the verse suggests an actual mechanism, one that operated at the core of Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s most comprehensive exhibition to date, “آهتيقت” (Taqiyya) – The Right to Duplicité.” The vehemently repeated utterance of this term throughout the byzantine sound-image-teleprompter installation *Contra Diction (Speech Against Itself)*, 2015, refers to an ancient Arabic semantic concept that allows its user to outwardly and temporarily renounce his or her faith and to lie, so as to escape persecution at the hands of those of another faith or faction. What in the age of Daesh and its myriad mutations again constitutes a contemporary survival strategy simultaneously flourished in a Swiss kunsthalle as the latest variant of the prized post-colonial virtues of in-between-ness and hybridity.

Abu Hamdan unpacked taqiyya as an unexpectedly urgent sonic biopolitics, delineating it, for example, among the Druze, who struggle to maintain a voice of their own in the face of both surging Wahhabism and the Israeli-Palestinian status quo. The grotesque graphic design envisioned on the basis of immigration-policy procedures in the series of diagrams *Conflicted Phonemes*, 2012, meanwhile, addresses the EU’s

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Conflicted Phonemes*, 2012, vinyl, paper, paint, wood. Installation view.



hardening guidelines, according to which the fate of Somali asylum seekers is now apparently meted out via the “objective” science of identifying local accents.

Abu Hamdan’s treatment of governmental communication devices and schemata corrupts them, making them register and transmit the dissonances they’re designed to optimize, streamline, administer, and discipline. In the exhibition, this methodology veered from the humorous to the deadpan. The transcription software portrayed in *Contra Diction* intermittently threw back on the screen such hilarious bunk as “non-verbal truth can at times be just as revealing the car off your true identity as Jews is mostly on the juicer bananas for cough,” while the monochrome audio waves painted on the seven panels titled *Beneath the Surface*, 2015, which visualize the veracity of oral testaments/testimonies, proved sonic “uncertainty” to be nearly indistinguishable from “truth.”

The navigation of image regimes appeared less intricate—and also less enigmatic—than Abu Hamdan’s deconstructionist sculpting of sound and data. One gallery, painted the shade of pastel green that museums seem to reserve for historic masterworks, contained a framed reproduction of Géricault’s *Officier de chasseurs à cheval de la garde impériale chargeant* (The Charging Chasseur), 1812. Hung alongside it was a supposedly empowering detournement of this composition, picturing a Syrian-Druze protagonist of the Syrian Revolution, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, substituting the supercilious Napoleonic chevalier with a no less imperious Arab war hero. This multicomponent work, OD’ing on its postmodern title *Double-Take: Officer Leader of the Chasseurs Syrian Revolution Commanding a Charge*, 2014, further consists of an essayistic video narrated by the artist. It documents a tour of the sprawling English-countryside estate of an aspirational Syrian entrepreneur whose acquisition of this architectural gem allegedly came complete with said Géricault knockoff, inspiring him to commission a reinterpretation of the canvas. The vulgarities of this plot aside, the installation bypassed the fact that such cultural heritage is often best suited for postcolonial pop à la Kehinde Wiley’s 2005 *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*. From Versailles to Brooklyn, the ride to duplicity is not least interesting for the noises en route.

—Daniel Horn

MONS, BELGIUM

“Atopolis”

MANÈGE DE SURY

One of the two European cultural capitals of 2015, Mons was the perfect place for “Atopolis,” an awesome exhibition of twenty-three artists, organized by Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels. The show’s theme was the possibility of an ideal city in a globalized yet fragmented world. Mons was one of the first European cities to play a major role in industrialization; huge territories in and around the city were devoted to mining—and to housing the many foreign guest workers who were brought there. Around the coal mines, various nationalities lived together in specially designed communities, as if in a dress rehearsal for globalization: the whole world in one neighborhood. The exhibition venue, the Manège de Sury, was once a civil-guard barracks and a school, furnishing an apt metaphor for an independent community living in a micro-city. The title itself—combining Greek words meaning “nonplace” and “city”—is taken from the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant, a pioneer in thinking about hybridity and in arguing for an open society.

Functioning as an exhibition within the exhibition, *Globalization Reversed*, 2015, was a massive installation by Thomas Hirschhorn that



Jack Whitten, *Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 10' 4½" x 20' 8½". From “Atopolis,” 2015.

looked like an abandoned research center. On sheets of paper lying amid a total chaos of furniture, television sets, and defunct computers, visitors could draw or write their comments, advice, or reflections on the theme of the exhibition or the artist’s proposal. Or as Hirschhorn described his intention in his notes for the installation: “The form of my exhibition will be a corpus, a critical corpus that wants to give life to Glissant’s ideas. . . . My competence and my ambition are to create a visual experience of his concepts.” A more lyrical approach could be seen in *Atopolis: For Édouard Glissant*, 2014, a grandiose abstract painting by Jack Whitten. From a distance, this painting looked like an aerial photograph of an illuminated city, but knowing that Whitten is a great admirer of John Coltrane, I found myself equating the artist’s circular strokes of acrylic with the looping dynamism of jazz. Although the brushstrokes seem to be painted randomly, going in all directions, the general feeling is harmonious and the painting functioned as the perfect sound track for “Atopolis.”

Not all the works on view referred directly to Glissant. Meschac Gaba’s contribution, *Glo-Balloon*, 2013, was a big, inflatable balloon composed of flags, a bold statement about the ways in which individual identities are vanishing into a faceless, anonymous whole. The most powerful work presented was Francis Alÿs’s installation *Don’t Cross the Bridge Before You Get to the River*. Produced between 2005 and 2009, this ensemble is as topical today as when it first appeared. On August 12, 2008, on the Spanish side of the Strait of Gibraltar, a group of children carrying boats made out of flip-flops and sandals formed a line and headed into the water in the direction of Morocco. At the same moment, a similar group did the same in Morocco, heading toward Spain, thus symbolically bridging Europe and Africa. This poetic yet powerful action is documented in various media, but the photographs in particular are breathtaking.

As one walked out of this former schoolhouse, a glance back to the text by Lawrence Weiner painted on its facade took on a particular poignancy, considering the ongoing immigration crisis in Europe, centering on refugees crossing the Mediterranean. Three decades ago, Weiner could probably not have imagined that *We Are Ships at Sea Not Ducks on a Pond*, 1985/2015, would one day assume such topical resonance.

—Jos Van den Bergh

MILAN

Vincenzo Agnetti

STUDIO GIANGALEAZZO VISCONTI

Vincenzo Agnetti (1926–1981) rigorously explored the genesis of artistic ideas through a polyvalent practice based on a critique of language.